B'Seder
The Design of a Social Medium for Polish and Jewish Communities

by
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B'SEDEER

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Abstract
“The history of the Polish-Jewish relationship is...the embattled terrain of several collective memories, each with its claim to moral legitimacy, and each charged with fierce and sometimes vehement feelings.” These contested histories are the source of tension and animosity between Poles and Jews to this day. Unlike the German-Jewish relationship, where “the moral rights and wrongs were starkly clear,” Poland’s past is far more complex.2

This thesis describes the design of a storage and retransmission medium for these contested histories, using photography, nomadic performance, new media mapping techniques and imaginary architecture. The system, entitled B'Seder, makes use of the ancient technology of memory palaces to produce a long-term relational aesthetic practice for the transformation of post-conflict societies through storytelling, conversation, and the mapping of narratives into visual forms. Using a well established process from post-traumatic therapy, the medium focuses on restructuring fragmented memories into a cohesive, flowing story.

In formal terms, the project begins with a photograph of an empty room. Anecdotes are collected from readings, films and conversations with community participants. These anecdotes are then transformed into mnemonic objects, which are depicted in the image. This process of accumulation of object/stories continues as the image is taken to new sites with new participants. The system then transitions into an editing and organizing mode where these anecdotes are arranged into a singular narrative sequence, which is memorized and recounted in public space.

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I do apologize if I’ve left your name out. So many others have helped me with my work at MIT. I hope I can eventually thank each of you in person.
To read is to wander through an imposed system analogous to a city.

— Michel de Certeau
Previous Left:
Sketch for a Memory Palace, 2007
Lyn Wojtowicz
3D CAD rendering

Previous Right:
B'Seder, 2008
Lyn Wojtowicz
medium format photograph
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CAVEAT

I often wonder if this project is simply a bad idea. B'Seder is the beginning of an attempt to bridge or, more accurately, re-compose two identity worlds. Perhaps the need for a bridge is a naïve and unfounded nostalgic impulse. Perhaps these two worlds called “Polish” and “Jewish” have always been separate. Perhaps they have always been bounded by “othering,” by anti-Semitism, by “anti-Polonism,” by fear of the neighbor, by language, by figures of speech and turns of phrases, by humor, by violence, by traditions. Perhaps it would be best that these two cultural realities remain well isolated from one another. Perhaps there should be few connectors between them.

Some writers refer to Polish-Jewish relations as a minefield. It is an apt analogy. Minefields are designed to slow down time. They are certainly tragic weapons with so many innocent victims, but they do generate a kind of peace.

I wonder if perhaps some fields should remain impassable, with deadly consequences for the transgressors. For who knows what may follow if they are cleared?
INTRODUCTION

In 1995 a young Polish law student opens up a copy of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, hoping to learn about the Jewish perspective on World War II. He sees that all the Poles in the comic book are drawn as pigs. Offended, he puts down the book, dismissing it wholesale.

A young Jew in Poland, 1942, is adopted and hidden by a Catholic family. He sits in a church trying nervously to blend in. His neighbor turns to him and says, “We know who you are.” Out of fear for his life, he flees Poland the next day, never to return.

A Polish Catholic American lawyer attends a Jewish wedding in 2004 and is slapped on the back and told “So your grandfathers were killing mine?” He had family in Auschwitz too.

A young woman in 1935 at a university in Warsaw leads an anti-Semitic political rally. Fifty years later Yad Vashem awards her the title of Righteous Among Nations for risking her life to hide a Jewish family in the war.

As recently as 2010, the New York Times, Der Speigel and Haaretz refer to Nazi death camps as “Polish death camps,” confusing the public’s understanding of history. Poles everywhere are enraged.
1941. In a small town in Soviet-occupied Poland, an angry mob herded the town’s Jewish residents into a barn and set it on fire, killing everyone inside. Similar pogroms take place in 1919 and 1946. Poles blame German and Russian agitation. Jews blame centuries of Polish anti-Semitism.

In 2010, the Wikipedia article on Polish anti-Semitism is flagged for removal. The ensuing debate to decide on its removal is one of Wikipedia’s longest ever. It has no clear outcome.

*The history of the Polish-Jewish relationship is one of the most complex examples of a contested past—of which we have so many other unhappy instances. We can see the horrific consequences of stuck, conflicting memories in such places as Ireland or Yugoslavia, or, for that matter, the Middle East. In a sense, the Polish past, particularly during the Holocaust, is more debatable than German history during the same period. In the case of Nazism, the moral rights and wrongs were starkly clear, and, broadly speaking, both Germans and Jews today take the same view of what happened. But the Polish-Jewish past is the embattled terrain of several collective memories, each with its claim to moral legitimacy, and each charged with fierce and sometimes vehement feelings.⁴*

This “embattled terrain” that Hoffman refers to is at the very heart of this research project. The complex thousand year cohabitation of Jewish and gentile people in central Europe has produced a variety of conflicting narratives. This thesis describes how I aim to collect these stories with the aim of producing a space for improving Polish/Jewish relations. The perceptions and realities of anti-Semitism as well as the negative stereotypes of Poles and their history are some of the foremost components of this terrain.

One of the greatest heroes of recent Polish history was Jan Karski, a man who risked his life to bring the first reports of the Shoah to Western governments—reports which were largely ignored. In 1942 he smuggled himself into the Belžec death camp where he saw the Nazi extermination policy firsthand. He then managed to escape the camp, flee Poland and make his report in person to the Polish government-in-exile in London. This story, well known in Polish circles, is frequently held up as an example of the national fight against the Shoah. Karski, however, had some important observations about Poland’s own forms of anti-Semitism:
The solution of the ‘Jewish Question’ ... is a serious and quite dangerous tool in the hands of the Germans, leading toward the ‘moral pacification’ of broad sections of Polish society ... although the nation loathes [the Germans] mortally, this question is creating something akin to a narrow bridge upon which the Germans and a large portion of Polish society are finding agreement ... this situation threatens to demoralize broad segments of the populace, and this in turn may present many problems to the future authorities endeavouring to rebuild the Polish state. It is difficult; ‘[Hitler’s] lesson is not lost.’ ... might it not be possible in some way, to a certain extent, in the face of the existence of three enemies (if, of course, one should currently regard the Jews as enemies), to endeavour to create something along the lines of a common front with the two weaker partners against the third more powerful and deadly enemy, leaving accounts to be settled with the other two later? ... The establishment of any kind of broader common front would be beset with very many difficulties from the perspective of wide segments of the Polish populace, among whom anti-Semitism has by no means decreased.6

The aim of this thesis and the project described within is to create, through artistic practice, a medium that can accumulate and transmit narratives about shared Polish and Jewish histories—including the uncomfortable and miserable ones as well as those that give reason for celebration and wonder. Using a variety of means, including oral storytelling, writing, photography, sculpture and internet-enabled digital media, this project will produce a hypertextual experience depicting this “embattled terrain” and, more importantly, reshape it.

The politics of this project will be formed by the dynamics of Polish/Jewish relations to date, although the importance of departing from old narrative patterns cannot be overstated. Eva Hoffman provides a guiding principle:

*I think that the task in our generation is exactly to examine the past more strenuously, to press the questions raised by our memories—or, more frequently, received ideas—further; to lift, in other words, our own prohibitions on thought.*

This is a design project as well as a project of imagination. In the following chapters, I describe the main challenge of the project, I outline a set of requirements that it must satisfy and I describe the overall project plan. As a whole, this thesis represents merely the beginning of a
long-term project that will continue for the author’s entire life and perhaps longer if taken up by others.

I expect the primary audience of this work to be people who identify as Polish. The writer Rafael Scharf describes the importance of work like this to developing a Polish identity:

For the Poles ... it is, I believe, a subject of primary importance. A millennium of Jewish presence on Polish lands and their sudden and final absence, are facts without which Poles are not able to understand their past and, therefore, their present. The history of Poland in the version taught and presented to the nation is full of falsehoods, as happens everywhere where an official version has a monopoly fitting the current dogma [circa 1986] and where the researcher is hampered by censorship and lack of access to sources. Moral regeneration calls for an authentic dialogue with the past. The way other people see us must serve as a corrective to the way we see ourselves. The Jews appear, to Poles in quest of self-knowledge, as witnesses who must be listened to carefully and who must, of course, be questioned. 8

The Polish nation, in its best form, is a state that will continue to produce an ever deeper and more authentic dialogue with its past. It is a dialog that must be multi-lingual and multi-national. It must be embedded in a process of deconstructing culture and recomposing history with careful attention to the ethical concerns of social change. It is, afterall, a dialogue embedded within the one of the worst tragedies of human history.

The Two Sides

The very terms “Polish” and “Jewish,” when they appear in proximity, set up a mutually-exclusive binary which is itself both misleading and problematic. Poland used to be the most Jewish place in the world. To be Polish now means to live in relation to Jewishness in some way—either by being Jewish, by being Jewish-ish or by being distinctly not Jewish.

In a sense, to be Polish is to be Jewish, just as to be American is to be Black and to be Canadian is to be Québécois. Without this minority, there is no nation.
If it were possible to simplify Polish/Jewish relations to a two-sided debate, the Jewish perspective might go something like this:

*The fact that the gassing and burning of Jews, which went on for years, was never interrupted by a single external act of blind rage ... [The Poles] did not feel sufficiently moved and enraged to intervene, individually or collectively, with ‘their bare teeth’ or by whatever means regardless of the consequences.*

The typical Polish perspective, on the other hand might say:

*In their bitterness Jews often were and are insensitive to the predicament and misery of the Poles. They do not remember that attempts to help a Jew brought the threat of death.*

Therein lie some of the moral complexities of the Polish/Jewish relationship. Deeper explorations of the histories of these two imagined communities reveal some of the darkest and most elevated stories about human nature.
PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS

[Poland] was the only major medieval political unit not to have been built on the spiritual foundations laid by the Roman Empire. ... Their zeal ... is the zeal of the convert, for they were neither conceived by Rome nor born in Christianity.11

In order that you may better understand this project and anticipate its biases, it behooves me to describe who I am, what I believe, and some of my motivations behind this work.

I am both Polish and Jewish, although neither very well. My command of the Polish language is at a fifth-grade level and I’ve only been a Jew, officially, for about two years. While I inhabit one of these two categories, I become a foreigner to the other. Yet, I am never at home unless I am both Polish and Jewish.

My parents were born in Poland during World War II to Catholic families—my mother more so, my father less so. In the summer of 2009, I converted to Judaism for reasons I describe below. This process of transition and travel between Polish Catholic and Jewish communities continues to take shape in my life and in my art. To understand these two words: “Polish” and “Jewish” is one of the aims of my work. This thesis is part of my attempt to explore these two ideas, separately and in conjunction, through the lenses of contemporary art, film, literature and historical texts. Hopefully this project will be of benefit to others who find themselves in a similar position,
between two worlds, be it between Polishness and Jewishness, between one religion and another, between their family of origin and their own nuclear family, between their own space and their neighbor’s, between a new home and an ancestral home, between one nation and another.

St. Augustine famously invented one of the major ethical tenants of Christianity when he said, “Love, and do what you will.” This is an expression of the Golden Rule, supposedly the single overlapping concept between all major religions, however Christianity’s idolization of love as an over-arching moral principle is one of the reasons why I was never pursued this religion. Love alone is not enough. Ethics, justice and the myriad of complex questions about how to live life deserve greater consideration.

I could compare my perspective on Christianity as the difference between the Golden Rule according to Rabbi Hillel and the Golden Rule according to Jesus some 50 years later. Consider the different implications of: “that which is hateful to you, do not do to others” and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Hillel’s golden rule is about reducing harm through an appreciation of the rights of others, while Jesus advocates for one’s self at the moral center and asks you to project onto others actively. Hillel is defending others, Jesus is promoting the self as the local moral authority. Hillel is saying “think of the worst case and don’t do it to others” while Jesus is saying “whatever you like, others will like too.” Hillel’s ethic may not cover as much ground, but it provides for more diversity.

My heart lies with Judaism because of its tradition of debate and open interpretation. My heart also lies with Judaism because of the age of its tradition and because of how its stories are not about perfect people but about flawed individuals struggling with the complex problems of how to live, with failures as well as successes. My heart is with Judaism because of how Jews are taught to discourage conversion and proselytizing. My heart lies with the Jewish sense of humor, with borsch, with cholent, with matzah ball soup, with Judaism’s decentralization and with how Judaism privileges the home before the synagogue — the gathering of people before architecture. My heart lies with Judaism because of Shabbat: a temple in time rather than space.
is unfortunate enough to be living without a community center, without a community at all, without a home, one will still have the passing of time.

My heart also lies with Judaism because of its ethic of charity — tzedakah. In Judaism, the highest form of charity is where the recipient is unaware of the identity of the donor, where, through the act of giving, the donor gains nothing in return. Elie Wiesel, in his Passover Haggadah, describes an architectural space for charity that is designed for this specific kind of anonymity. This form is an enclosed room with two doors: an entrance and an exit. At the entrance, people would line up — both donors with money to give and those in need of financial support, although no one would know which is which. Only one person would be allowed into the space at a time, where they would find a container with money in it. Each person would decide for themselves whether they would put money in, or take money out. Since no one would know beforehand how much money was in the room, no one would know whether the person before them added to the sum or took from it. Only the person who took the very last money out of the room would be known. This design not only regulates itself, but it protects the identities of both the donors and the recipients of charity, thus allowing people to maintain their dignity in times of hardship.

My heart also lies with Judaism because, like Islam, its spiritual leaders are actually encouraged to have a sex life. Judaism even promotes the radical idea of sex for pleasure. Part of celebrating the Sabbath involves pleasing one’s wife in bed and under Jewish religious law, women who are not sexually satisfied have solid grounds for divorce. This seems to me like a great way to build a joyful home, and only a recent development in western secular law. Judaism was hundreds of years ahead of its time.

I also love how Judaism morally privileges living a responsible life. Yom Kippur demands that Jews take it upon themselves to repair their mistakes in this life (not the next) with the people they have actually affected. In Catholicism, verbal confession may ease the burden of fault by sharing it with another but an atonement is a more complex interaction of trust, understanding, apology and responsive action between the transgressor and the affected person.
At the same time Poland and many Polish things are also dear to me. My heart is close to the Polish sense of humor, the arrogance, the pride, the emotional warmth, the bluntness and the smell of the hallways of old communist apartment buildings. It lies with bigos, with clodnik, with barszcz, with placki, and żubrówka. It rests with Warsaw’s Stary Rynek, which my maternal grandfather helped reconstruct—a necessary simulacrum that is both old and new. My heart is with Piotrków Trybunalski, the seat of Europe’s first parliamentary democracy. It is with the Poland of the middle ages which, while the rest of the continent was engulfed in religious wars, became a beacon of tolerance and freedom — a safe haven for minorities. My heart lies with the Armia Krajowa, the Warsaw Uprising and my two paternal grandparents; who met and married during this resistance struggle; who brought their family to Canada in the sixties; whose Polish patriotism was an émigré state; who taught me to drive a car and fire a rifle; who taught me the value of curiosity, of peacefulness, and the generous acceptance of others. My grandparents taught me a love of science, the search for knowledge, and an appreciation for the wonders nature and country living.

My heart lies with all the Poles mentioned in Yad Vashem’s Righteous Among Nations, who risked their lives to protect Jews during the war. My heart lies with my own maternal grandparents who are named amongst the righteous. My heart lies with the new post-Communist Poland, consumed by a “shock doctrine” of neoliberal capitalism, yet full of new freedoms, human rights and potential. My heart lies with Warsaw University’s new library, with the art gallery at Zamek Ujazdowski and with Zamek Wawel: a monument to Poland’s older governments.

I wonder to what extent my heart lies with my great great grandfather who testified as a character witness for Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov in 1914. The young communist leader was incarcerated in Poronin in southern Poland by the Austro-Hungarian forces. My ancestor’s testimony allowed Lenin to eventually reach Russia, thereby affecting the course of the Revolution and global politics for half of the 20th century. Some 50 years later, this historical footnote helped convince Poland’s Communist authorities to give my family exit visas.
There is little doubt that the logistic capabilities of Communist Russia helped win World War II and rebuild Polish material infrastructure, but the social and psychological costs of living under a totalitarian police state for two generations are still being paid today by Poles everywhere. My heart lies with the struggle of people under similar conditions, who fight to do the right thing while they try to understand what the right thing is to do.

Adorno famously wrote in 1948 “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” I want to understand that phrase and why he later retracted it. I want to understand how artists have responded to the Shoah in the past and how they will reflect on it in the future. (I intentionally use the word “Shoah” instead of “Holocaust,” which means a burnt offering — a deeply troubling meaning. I use the Hebrew word for “catastrophe” instead.) The question of how to remember this period of history is an open, living, evolving concern with which I want to more thoroughly engage. Before I can pursue any other major artistic work I need to return to the core terms, “Polish” and “Jewish,” to develop a deeper understanding of them.

This project is about working with my own naïveté, as a Pole raised abroad and as a new Jew. This work is about being a foreigner and using a perspective of distance, yet closeness, to give something back to both communities. I aim to use this perspective as a strength, to bring new considerations to both communities, while understanding the value of the boundaries between them. I want to create a framework for Poles and Jews to enter into more meaningful and less circular, repetitive communications with one another, in person and online. At the moment, it does seem that the divide is very wide.

I hope that by openly and directly describing my position as an author that you, dear reader, may take into consideration my interests and biases.
Identity and Terminology

Before continuing to the design of the B’Seder project, it is worth exploring the meaning behind the terms “Polish” and “Jewish,” and what is and can be meant by the term “Polish/Jewish relations.” Often, when these two terms appear in texts, they serve to produce a binary where the two groups are discussed as mutually exclusive communities. The boundaries, however, are by no means clear. One might understand “Polish” to mean anyone with citizenship in the Polish state, regardless of religious or ethnic identity, in which case “Polish” and “Jewish” are overlapping terms, as in the notion of being a “Polish Jew.” However, “Polish” is also considered an ethnic term that has strong correlation with Catholic identity and practice, in which case “Polish” and “Jewish” are mutually exclusive. Historically speaking, Jewish people within the territory of Poland have had a distinct status within the legal framework of the country and so the definition of “Jewishness” existed within legislative frameworks as well. The German state, of course, had legal definitions of what constituted being a Jew that were far broader than the religious definitions. Within Jewish religious law, halakha, various boundaries on Jewishness exist: within Masorti and Orthodox communities, Jewish identity is inherited only matrilineally, but within the Reform movement, children with only Jewish fathers are considered Jewish too.

One can imagine a diverse array of identity relations between the terms Polish and Jewish: Polish-Jewish; Jewish-Polish; Polish/Jewish; Polish Jew; Jewish Pole; Polish and Jewish; Poles who once were Jewish; Poles with Jewish ancestors; Jewish orphans raised by Poles; baptized Jews; Polish Jews who left Poland and no longer consider themselves Polish; Polish Jews who left Poland and no longer consider themselves Polish but are considered so by others; Polish converts to Judaism; Polish Jewish converts to Catholicism; Jews living outside of Poland with Polish neighbors; Poles who identify with, study and know more about Jewish culture than about Polish culture; Jews with ancestors from Poland; Jews returning to Poland; Jews vacationing in Poland; Poles living in Israel; Jews working in Polish companies; Jews working in Polish government institutions under Soviet control; Polish children with Jewish names; Jewish adults with Polish ac-
cents; observant Jews with Polish moustaches; Polish marrano aristocrats; Polish Nazi informants who identified Jews incorrectly; Jews in Poland who would have been alive today if not for anti-Semitism; Jews in Poland who do not know that they are Jewish; Poles who think they are Jewish but are not; Jews who discriminate against Polishness; Polish anti-Semites; Jews who advocate against anti-Semitism in Poland but are anti-Semitic themselves; Polish families with some Jewish members; Jews interested in Polish things; Poles who celebrate Jewishness with other Poles; Polish music on Jewish instruments; Jewish music in Polish churches; Jewish churches built with Jewish funds; Polish funds for Jewish museums; Jewish museums of Polish history; Polish school textbooks that focus on Jewish life and absence; Jews living in Poland today; Polish aid to Jews in World War II; stories of Polish/Jewish romance; stories of Polish/Jewish betrayal; Polish soldiers in Jewish armies; Poles living on property owned by Jews; Jews from parts of Poland no longer Polish; Jews who drive Polish luxury sedans; Poles wearing kippas; Poles selling antique chanukkiahs in market squares; Poles who eat challa and call it chafoka; Jews who eat placki and call them latkes; Polish plumbers who use Israeli technology; Jewish filmmakers who write Polish jokes that Poles actually laugh at; Jewish politicians in Poland before the war; etc...

The complexity of the assumed mutual exclusion between the terms “Polish” and “Jewish” compound when considering the Jewishness of Poland and the Polishness of Judaism (or the Polishness of Israel, for that matter). As Poland’s largest minority group, and one with historically high representation in academic, intellectual, artistic and commercial sectors, Jewish communities contributed foundationally to Poland’s national identity and imagination. One could even assert that Jewishness is an essential component of Polishness. Rafael Scharf, writing in 1986, wondered to what extent “Poles are aware of the fact that with the Jews an authentic part of their Poland was obliterated.” Sadly, this recognition of the authenticity of Jewishness to the identity of Poland is often lost in Polish/Jewish dialog.

If there were an essential component to being Polish it would certainly be the language. I would even suggest that the Polish language is even more essential to “Polishness” than Hebrew
is to “Jewishness”; which is to say, the authenticity of one’s Polishness, if one speaks no Polish, can be more easily called into question than someone’s Jewishness if they speak no Hebrew.

Territory is another essential, although complicated, identifier of Polishness. The geographic boundaries of Poland have shifted substantially over the course of its history, drawn less by natural features than by the pressures of neighboring political powers. In the 17th century, Poland was the largest country in Europe after an alliance with Lithuania, but was later invaded by Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and partitioned between them for the entire 19th century.
The map in the margin shows the historical borders of Poland in relationship to the major Jewish population areas of Europe (known as the Pale of Settlement) at the turn of the 20th century. Before World War II, Poland had the highest concentration of Jews of any country in the world, supporting the notion that before the establishment of Israel, Poland was the center of the Jewish world.

In face of this map, it may be interesting to consider this quote by Witold Gombrowicz, a famous Polish artist and playwright:

*I was a Pole. Poland was my location. What is Poland? It is a country between the West and the East, where Europe begins to extinguish; a transitory country where the East and the West weaken each other. Thus, it is a country of a weakened form.*

Poland itself contributed substantially to the meaning of Jewishness by creating a safe haven during times of prosecution, thereby enabling Poland to flourish into a center for Jewish life. This life, however, was largely confined to scientific, religious, cultural and business spheres. With the exception of workers parties, high-ranking positions in Poland’s political and military establishments were typically off-limits to Jews.

The term “Polish/Jewish relations,” although meant to refer to the relationship between two separate communities, is also an ambiguous term. It refers to two labels with particular interacting dynamics of connectedness and simultaneity. One could say with confidence that Polish-Jewish relations affect anyone whose life involves only Polishness or Jewishness alone. But since “Polishness” and “Jewishness” do intersect in various ways, this field of relations may also serve to help enrich and develop a single person’s own intra-personal dynamics.
SYSTEM DESIGN

In this section I describe the design process of the B’Seder project. Although the work in its current state could be described as photography, performance, writing architecture, I will begin by using the terminology of software design and usability testing.

Design Problem
Create a social medium for collecting and transmitting stories about Polishness and Jewishness that can work towards improving the relationship between these two communities.

Requirements
Each of the following items describe a requirement that this system must satisfy. These requirements can be used to judge the progress and success of the design.
1) Attention to Cultural Conflict
This is the core purpose of the B'Seder project. Although initially the project will focus on Polish and Jewish histories, it should anticipate other communities and cultural conflicts, disagreements and discords. The medium should acknowledge that conflicting historical memories exist, and the system should in some way attend to these differences. Resolving them may not be a necessary or even a desired outcome. Conflicts can have very complex histories, which lead to their present conditions. For this reason, it may be naïve to rush towards a solution. The creation of a medium that can simply suspend or recite the various dissonant narratives within a shared space may itself be a remarkable achievement.

Whatever kind of design of the system produces, however, its focus should be on the problems of cultural conflict.

2) Focus on Storytelling

*What is truer than truth? The story.*

Stories are a primary carrier of collective and individual identity. They are the very mechanisms of human memory and can be the site, cause and resolution to conflicts. For this reason, B'Seder focuses on stories and storytelling as its primary mode of operation. The importance of storytelling in situations of conflict are explained in more detail in the following chapter.

3) Multiple Authorship
The medium must be flexible enough to allow many people to contribute and shape the stories collected within it. By allowing people to cross from audience to producers, the system avoids the realm of propaganda and begins to attend to the real concerns of the communities in question.
4) Long Term Usefulness
Many cultural conflicts have long histories. The B’Seder medium must remain useful over a long period so as to allow sufficient time for the “working-through” of various components of the conflict. As a target duration for design purposes, the medium should be useful for at least three hundred years. In order to accommodate future variations in technological conditions, the system should not be overly dependant on electronic media. Resource-intensive media may augment the project, but cannot be a core component of the work. The system should also be ready to be translated into other media, if necessary.

5) Accessibility
The medium must be easily comprehensible by a person of average intelligence and means.

6) Transparent Ethics
The process of adding, modifying and removing content must be transparent to both the storyteller and the audience. This process must itself be subject to review and modification by participants. In particular, the terms under which conversations may be quoted must be made clear to participants, with informed consent as the basis of the method. In absence of a clear understanding with conversants, any acquired information must remain absolutely anonymous.

7) Fluidity and Connectedness
There must be a coherent sequential path through the majority of the collected stories such that they can be recounted as a single, flowing narrative. This is the core intent of the project: to take disarray and produce a sequential whole.
8) Versions & Branching
Improvements on this medium must be encouraged, while branching and parallel competing versions must be discouraged. Competition and disagreement are productive social forces that must be harnessed within the work itself, and through its internal mechanisms, instead of causing the project to be split into different streams. Much like Wikipedia improves its content through group debate, so to must *B’Seder*. If necessary, a methodology can be created to annotate conflicting components of the project. Branching the project must be an option of last resort.

9) Oral/Aural Mode
The medium must be primarily auditory, not visual or written. This connects to the requirements of storytelling, long term usability and accessibility. By centering around oral storytelling, the medium stands to be more adaptable and emotionally meaningful to a wider array of audience members. Verbal interaction creates richer possibilities for conversations and questions to emerge throughout the process, which will likewise become key to the long term evolution of the medium. Visual and written forms may be considered a disposable element of the system.

10) Proximity & Distance
The medium must allow for either distance or proximity between participants, as necessary. In the case of verbal storytelling, proximity is the natural inclination, although distance can be produced through means such as personal intermediaries or voice telephony. When dealing with the aftermath of conflict, proximity may be necessary to produce trust, while distance can help in maintaining safety, or vice versa depending on the participants.
Use Cases

Most gallery-based artworks live a lonely life. The work is produced, hung on a wall and then abandoned for hapless public encounters. To most people, art (contemporary art, in particular) is silent, foreign and strange. In order to understand and enjoy a broader variety of art, one has to traverse a steep learning curve — a visual, historical and philosophical literacy barrier. One of my undergraduate art teachers once said to me “the more time you give to art, the more it will give back to you.” I have found this to be true in my own experience as an artist and as a viewer of art; however new art audiences often lack patience and find encounters with art a frustrating experience. The illegibility of the work combined with the authority of the gallery confronts them, leaving them bewildered or with a sense that they should appreciate what they have just seen. It is no surprise, then, that some of the most compelling artworks are those that can be enjoyed by newcomers and cognoscenti alike. Some artists accomplish this feat by using colloquial visual languages, popular references or literal and direct communication styles. But for the most part, galleries are foreign places of distance and alienation where descriptions, titles, guided tours and docents exist to bridge the knowledge world of visitors with the knowledge world of this strange thing: the artwork.

Single Viewer, Single Object

“I don’t get it,” is a common refrain amongst gallery visitors—a refrain met usually by silence. The isolation of viewers can frustrate their ability to produce new questions and see the world through the lens of a given work. Art, although often cryptic, does serve an important purpose in reshaping the world, and, sadly, galleries and museums are all too often places that destroy visitors’ inquisitiveness and sense of mystery.

The confusion that art can produce is a fertile moment. What interests me in this project is producing a kind of interaction that inhabits this space of bewilderment and activates new possibilities for the movement of meaning amongst the viewer, the artists and the art object. I am
interested in the interactive, pedagogical and performative possibilities of inserting the artist between the viewers and the objects of their attention.

Multiple Viewers, Single Object
Consider another scenario, similar to the first, where two people visit a gallery and encounter a bewildering work. The effect of the work upon one individual can be transmitted through conversation, giving the experience of viewing the work a text. The artwork is no longer silent, but assumes new meaning through conversation.

In this two viewer (plus artwork) scenario, the work serves as a kind of broadcast function, making the gallery a space for speech. Although many gallery visitors seem inhibited by the space, feeling unable to speak as if bound by sacrilegious transgression, steps can be taken to promote interaction. Many artists employ signifiers of public space and popular culture in their works. Others intentionally use materials and objects that are domestic or personal in nature. Some will create images or installations that draw the visitors' attention to one another, such as Dan Graham's video and mirror works.

Left:
Dan Graham
Time Delay Room, 1974
At no point in works like this does the artist actually hear the conversations of the visitors, nor can the visitors actually modify the work. Although viewers’ experience is now shared, the artwork itself is speechless and there is still a huge divide between the artist and the viewers. The implicit assumption with most artworks is that the artist is too important to share his or her time with the viewers of the work. The object stands-in for the artist.

New forms of art emerged in the 20th century to break the alienating effect of visual art (while the theatrical avant-garde went in the opposite direction, intentionally producing alienation). Performance art placed people where canvases and sculptures once stood, producing art objects that became animated subjects. Allan Kaprow and his instruction-based performances, or “happenings” as they became known, further broke down the divide between the audience and the performer. There was no stage just as there was no object. Everyone was part of the topic of the work and everyone was a subject of the work. More recently, artists like Rikrit Tirvanija and Tino Seghal have extended the work of Kaprow to produce a form of aesthetic practice wherein the relations between people became the material of the work. Their work used physical objects in a gallery and was time-bounded like a performance, but was neither sculpture nor performance.

I am interested in the possibility of bridging the worlds of dematerialized art (that is: conceptual art, performance art, relational aesthetics, etc.) with art that has a material presence. Performance art, conceptual art and relational practices are meant to be entirely experienced in situ, thereby suffering from being very hard to represent outside of that moment. Event posters, written reviews and verbal anecdotes serve to present the experience of “being there,” but none of these artefacts are key to the work. I propose a system that can exist both as a visual artefact and as a performative work. For B’Seder, the image produced is the key to the experiential work—a window or a script through which it can be re-performed in other places at other times.
Multiple Viewers, Object/Performer Hybrid

Consider an expanded scenario where the artist is actually present with their work and interact directly with their audience. This is the interaction scenario of an art opening, or a performative work. In this situation, the artist is actually present with the art piece and becomes an interpreter/interlocutor between previous viewers, current viewers and the object itself. The artist’s presence enables a tighter cycle of feedback and revision to the work. Instead of relying on a mass production or broadcast model where the artist is removed from the event of reception, this scenario places the artist at the center of a feedback loop, not unlike the feedback systems described by Norbert Weiner in his seminal work *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*.

I take further inspiration from the world of open source software engineering, which has developed a production system that I aim to appropriate for use in artistic production. “Git” is a system for managing simultaneous source code editing between distributed groups of programmers. This system manages the process of updating, branching and merging edits of different people. In the Git methodology, the notion of hierarchies of authorship have dissolved into a decentralized system of checks and balances for cooperative work. If one person believes that a piece of software should have a feature that it is lacking, it is simple to create a copy (cloning), or manage one’s own variation (branching) of other person’s software. This individual may then decide whether or not to give their work back to the original author. The Git system allows for
multiple varieties of a software system to exist, simultaneously, while managing the passing back and forth of updates to subcomponents (pushing and pulling). In essence, Git is a system that enables and manages massively decentralized coauthorship of software.

Much in the same vein as Git, I propose a similar model for the B’Seder project, whereby authorship does not reside in a single artist, editor or storyteller, but is rather distributed and open to branching and simultaneous competing versions. However, in keeping with the 8th requirement mentioned previously, the B’Seder system must push for a single stream of development. It should enable branching and multiple parallel works, but must work to keep the multiples to a minimum.

Four Design Phases
Now with an understanding of the design requirements in hand and having established its basic interaction typology, we can propose a timeline for the B’Seder project in four distinct phases.

1) Accumulation & Testing
The first phase of the project involves the collection of anecdotes from a wide variety of sources, beginning with texts, films and personal experiences. Once initial anecdotes have been collected, a process of accumulation through storytelling and conversation can begin. Each of these storytelling sessions can likewise become a kind of testing ground for the particulars of the performative event.

As a practical and formal concern, the anecdotes will initially be collected and depicted as mnemonic objects within the backdrop of an empty room. The iterative process of accumulation will involve creating an object to relate and remind the storyteller and their audience of the anecdote in question. The object will be added to the image of the empty room, thus producing a montage that can be used as an index for future storytelling sessions. This photomontage and
the object-mnemonics within it will become a key component of the next phase of the *B'Seder* project.

2) Editing & Organizing
In this next phase, the collection of mnemonic objects are rearranged and modified in order to produce a cohesion and sequence within the collection. The storyteller should eventually be able to move in a path of narrative recitation from one object to the next, recounting a fluid natural and (hopefully) compelling story. The tension between the disarray of the previous phase and the movement towards order in this phase is the key challenge and work of the project. The primary challenge, however, is to simply keep the process moving. As Harold Morowitz wrote, "the flow of energy through a system acts to organize that system." To loop through a) accumulating anecdotes, b) depicting them as mnemonic objects in the photomontage, c) rearranging the photomontage, and d) re-presenting the photomontage for further discussion is the mean by which the system will organize itself.

So the transition between the accumulation phase and the editing phase need not be abrupt. Instead, the primary storyteller may guide the project back and forth between these two phases before settling on a satisfactory grand narrative and moving onto phase 3.

3) Memorization
In this segment of the project, the storyteller makes use of the accumulated mnemonic objects from phase 1 and the order of the objects derived from phase 2 to create a memory palace. A memory palace is a technique for memorizing large amounts of information that was a foundational component of the Hellenistic, Classical and (by extension) Christian intellectual traditions before the invention of the printing press. The memory palace technique is described in more detail in the following chapter. Translating the photomontage composition into an immate-
rial memory palace will provide a range of flexible possibilities as the storyteller approaches the fourth phase.

As with other phases in this design process, the storyteller may find it useful to return to previous phases should more accumulation and editing be needed. Overall, however, the trend should be a movement from the first through to the fourth phase of the project.

4) Public Recitation
Finally, the memory palace will be enacted in a public space for a larger group of audience/participants. The form of the public recitation is not fully determined in this paper, but a few tentative ideas are explored in later chapters. A public recitation could take the form of a speech or lecture, a walking tour, a play, a film, a book, a street performance, an opera or some other typology. Although this end state may very well be the most compelling component of the work for an outsider, the earlier phases of the work should not be discarded, but should continue to be an active set of tools in revising and revisiting this public recitation phase.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Two broad categories of ideas have informed the B’Seder project: research relating specifically to Polish and Jewish cultures, and theories for producing a general system for mediating cultural conflict. This chapter deals exclusively with the second category of ideas that can be applied to a generalized methodology. While the system design question was concerned with how to design a medium for recording and transmitting contested Polish and Jewish narratives, the main question of this chapter, and indeed the project in a larger sense, could be summed up as: how can we create a medium for positively transforming contested narratives of any post-conflict society? These theories could likely inform artistic and humanitarian projects for any number of situations where people are dealing with “the horrific consequences of stuck, conflicting memories” such as Ireland, Yugoslavia, the Middle East or aboriginal societies the world over.20

Each section that follows attempts to summarize and discuss a specific concept that has helped in the development of the technique behind the B’Seder project. The interdisciplinary research areas that inform the project include: scientific studies on memory encoding and recall; classical texts on the art of the memory palace; Jewish texts on the Hebraic memorization techniques; texts from a variety of disciplines on Polish-Jewish relations and history; and theories relating to conflict resolution and trauma therapy.
The aim here is to build up an understanding around the functioning of collective and individual memory, its transmission and the process of “moving past” lamentation in order to imagine new present realities that are less controlled by traumatic events. More specifically this project will take the form of a “memory palace” — the classical, pre-printing press memorization technique that uses spatial visualization for individuals to store and recall large narratives. This framework will house and transmit some formal and anecdotal research into Polish/Jewish relations (a now established term in historical and contemporary social academic research, as well as in diplomatic circles).

The Memory Palace

One of the defining theories of B’Seder is the ancient rhetorical technique of the memory palace. This was not literally an architectural space, but rather a methodology for dramatically improving one’s ability to recall information. A memory palace is a uniquely structured imaginary space of any kind—typically an interior space. It could be a house, a park, a car or a street. This technique makes use of our minds’ natural proficiency for spatial memory to index memories of any kind. It begins by picturing a vividly well-known place and then filling with it with mnemonic objects that represent the things one wants to remember. Much like one might keep gifts as object mementos of the givers, so too can these objects remind one of specific information. The process of recalling information from a memory palace is the act of imagining oneself walking through the given space. Masters of this technique were said to have been able to accurately remember tens of thousands of names or even entire books, verbatim.23

According to various classical texts, the technique was invented by Simonides of Ceos, a poet, circa 500 BCE after attending a catastrophic banquet.24 Simonides had just recited an ode to the host when he stepped out of the hall to answer a call at the front door. At that very moment the roof collapsed upon the banquet, killing everyone but him. As the sole living witness of the eve-
ning, he was called upon to identify the remains. He managed to do so flawlessly and with great confidence by recalling the guests’ locations around the table. This tragic event gave birth to Simonides’ insight into spatial memory. He realized that the ease with which he could remember the guests’ names was strongly linked to having a mental image of their positions in the room. Remembering complex information was possible by extrapolating it from memories of simpler things, like the image of a room. A memory palace is simply an artificially-constructed mental image depicting things one wants to remember.

Simonides described the idea of a memory palace this way:

... persons desiring to train this faculty (of memory) must select places and form mental images of the things they wish to remember and store those images in the places, so that the order of the places will preserve the order of the things, and the images of the things will denote the things themselves, and we shall employ the places and images respectively as a wax writing-tablets and the letters written on it.25

The technique not only helps one remember a great number of things, but also helps maintain a sequence of those things. What is the point of remembering to get dressed, take a shower, go to work and ask your boss for a raise if you can not remember which should be done first and which last? Simonides also likens the process of using a memory palace to the act of writing on and reading back text from a wax tablet. The analogy between these two systems will become more deeply significant in a later chapter when I describe my initial experiments with designing my own memory palace.

The memory palace technique was so effective and powerful in its day that it remained critical to scholars for well over 2000 years. Even with the advent of the printing press in 1440 CE, the use of augmenting memory with spatial techniques did not quickly fade away.26 Today, the pervasive availability of printing technology and the growing reliance on digital storage systems may have obviated a popular necessity for robust natural memory techniques, but there are still substantial benefits to using memory palace technology.
One of the benefits of the memory palace is its flexibility. Unlike a book or film, which are static and identical each time they are used, memory palace systems work well when there is a benefit to quickly reshaping narratives to different places, audiences and moments in time. For some purposes (such as legal documentation) where perfectly reproducible recall is essential, this would be a drawback, but for the purposes of the B’Seder project, flexibility is an asset. The terrain of this particular project is not neutral or based in some kind of cultural relativism—it is highly charged, deeply political and wrapped in various ethical quandaries. Using a person as the medium instead of a book or a film gives agency to narrators and audience members in adapting, modifying and reacting to stories in subtle or profound ways to suit each situation. The B’Seder system needs this adaptability. Writing a book or a film about these topics, although admirable and useful undertakings, are not sufficient for creating lasting improvements in peoples’ relationships to one another. Often, more immediate social media are necessary.

The construction of a memory palace is no a simple task. It has a number of stages in its design and requires a certain amount of training and retraining to maintain its efficacy. The following text describes in more detail how the rhetors and philosophers of antiquity began to construct memory palaces.

The first step was to imprint on the memory a series of Loci or places. The commonest, though not the only, type of mnemonic place system used was the architectural type. ... In order to form a series of places in memory ... a building is to be remembered, as spacious and varied a one as possible, the forecourt, the living room, bedrooms, and parlours, not omitting statues and other ornaments with which the rooms are decorated. The images by which the speech is to be remembered—as an example of these ... one may use an anchor or a weapon—are then placed in imagination on the places which have been memorised in the building. This done, as soon as the memory of the facts requires to be revived, all these places are visited in turn and the various deposits demanded of their custodians. We have to think of the ancient orator as moving in imagination through his memory building whilst he is making his drawing from the memorised places the images he has placed on them.27
So the two key elements are the selection of a series of memorable places as a vessel for memories and a series of mnemonic objects that are keys for those memories. The action of moving through the constructed, imagined space is the act of recalling what one wants to remember. In order to build the most effective memory palace one should consider the specifics of how the space is designed. “It is better to form one’s memory loci in a deserted and solitary place for crowds of passing people tend to weaken the impressions.” This makes sense. Much like it is often easier to read and study in a quiet library than a crowded public space, so too should a memory palace be selected and shaped based on an existing quiet space. The space itself should also contain within it enough variation and unique elements that one’s progress through the space can be easily visualized. “It is useful to give each fifth locus some distinguishing mark.”

Camillo’s Memory Theatre

Although the memory palace is an immaterial technique, there have been numerous projects that have sought to materialize the principles of spatialized memory. One such project was Guilion Camillo’s Memory Theatre, designed in the mid sixteenth century and paid for by the King of France, although never completed.
Camillo’s invention was a large wooden structure, not unlike an amphitheater. Visitors, instead of sitting in the risers like one might expect, would sit in the center where a stage might be in a traditional theatrical space. Visitors would look out on the risers where Camillo had arranged mnemonic images in categories encompassing what he thought to be all the world’s knowledge. Audience members, by virtue of simply being in the space, would become more intelligent.

Camillo’s work is both similar and substantially different than B’Seder in some key ways. Both B’Seder and this Memory Theatre are kind of Sisyphean projects bound up in a need to capture a hugely diverse array of information. Both are monolithic in scope and ambition. If I were totally honest, I would say that both projects are also bound up in the fantasy notion of artistic genius, although I am working to bring B’Seder towards a more collaborative process where it may be shaped by the needs of others as well. While Camillo’s work is interested in encompassing a kind
of totality, *B’Seder* is interested in transformation, in process, in being more of a vehicle or a valve between two spaces that are always in flux.

**Mapping and Remapping a Memory Palace**

The following image depicts a floor plan of a building that could be used as a memory palace. Assuming that the site is well known to the memorizer, he or she could move through the space and either place objects or vividly image objects within the space that relate to ideas or narratives that the person wishes to remember. In the map below, each red dot represents a locus—an object representing one cluster of things to remember—with more significant ones outlined in black. One could imagine this map as a training terrain for a memory palace. Once learned, this memory palace could be used as described by Yates, in the oration of stories or speeches, by imagining oneself walking through this space again and seeing the mnemonic objects at each locus, thus keying in sequence ideas around which the overall story would function.
Once a memory palace is learned and committed to the mind, one could imagine transplanting it to other locations through a remapping process. The above set of loci, for example, could be unwrapped onto a site such as a public plaza or a particular path through a city, such as the one described in this image:

See this paper's conclusion for another example of this process.

Left: Illustration of a memory palace remapped onto the public space of Warsaw's Old Town.
Memorization in Jewish Tradition

The memory palace technique has deep roots in the scholarly traditions of the Hellenistic, Classical and Christian worlds. In Jewish tradition, however, the use of images as a memory technique was not common—other methods were used.

Besides the written sacred texts of Jewish theology (the Torah), a large body of rabbinic interpretations, known collectively as the “oral Torah” or the Talmud, were passed on from generation to generation for hundreds of years through a variety of techniques, primarily repetition structured through melody and song.

"the oral Torah, as an object of study, is called νυμηνας, ‘repetition’, ‘that which is repeated’, which term—being a typical so-called ma-nomen—refers to both to the act of repetition and the object of repetition. And to study this discipline is νυμηνας, since this study is in principle oral repetition: the teacher’s instruction, the pupil’s learning—in fact all study and maintenance of knowledge within this discipline—rests on the principle of oral repetition."339

So we see two basic memory techniques at play here that may be useful in the design of the *B’Seder* system: melody and repetition.

Memory in Scientific Research

Although classical theories about memory are the thematic foundation of the *B’Seder* project, scientific research also has a great deal to contribute. In the field of psychology, the primary model of memory, which establishes the basic terminology for research, is based on a technological metaphor:

"An effective memory system — whether it’s an audio- or videocassette recorder, the hard disk of your computer or even a simple filing cabinet — needs to do three things well. It has to be able to: 1. encode (i.e. take in or acquire) information, 2. store or retain that information faithfully and, in the case of long-term memory, over a significant period of time, 3. retrieve or access that stored information."40
This three stage model of memory relates directly to the four design stages of B’Seder: 1) accumulation, 2&3) organization and memorization 4) public recitation. So it follows that the language of scientific memory research can be applied to how we look at memory in B’Seder. However, it is worth keeping in mind that this storage-retrieval model of memory excludes other ways of thinking about it. For instance, one could conceive of memory as an active agent that pushes itself into the foreground of consciousness, instead of being intentionally retrieved when needed. Nonetheless, psychological studies do reveal many fascinating phenomena worth noting in the design of B’Seder. For instance, the primary use of acoustic components is not an arbitrary or purely aesthetic choice.

It was further suggested by Alan Baddeley in the 1960s that the verbal short-term store retained information primarily in an acoustic or phonological form. This view received support from noting the acoustic nature of the errors that appear during short-term recall. This occurred even when the material to be retained was presented visually, indicating that the stored information was converted to an acoustic code.

This study suggests that even when viewing visual material, it is initially transposed into an acoustic verbal form. It could follow, then, that having a storyteller present when interpreting an image, could have a very strong impact on the memory of that image, especially as short-term memory is translated into long-term memory.

“Continuing to attend to and turn over in one’s mind (or ‘rehearse’) information transfers it to the long-term store (sometimes referred to as secondary memory), which seems to have almost unlimited capacity.”

Repeating information is very important, as is the interesting acknowledgement of the tremendous capacity of the human mind to remember things. There is little danger of one’s memory “filling-up.” An effective memory, it seems, relates more to understanding various techniques for recall.
"It has been shown that one's memory span - i.e. the number of words that one can hear and then repeat back without error - is a function of the length of time that it takes to say the words."43

Time is a significant factor in recall. It seems that compressing information for human memory is a factor of how long it takes to say something. The longer it takes to say something, the less will be remembered. The number of words is not as significant as the amount of time it takes to say something. So: be brief.

Collage
Although the B’Seder photomontage is not a physical collage of paper and glue, and although it lacks the radical juxtapositions of what we expect from collage artworks, we can yet consider how it is similar to collage. The process of adding new objects into the scene from other photographic sources is, in the sense of digital craftsmanship, a cut-and-paste process. And the process of this kind of assemblage is akin to how people create conceptual images in their minds.

Rather than resembling maps, people’s internal representations seem to be more like collages. Collages are thematic overlays of multimedia from different points of view. They lack the coherence of maps, but do contain figures, partial information, and differing perspectives.44

In this sense, B’Seder is a collage of different points of view, different anecdotes, different experiences. It lacks the coherence of a maps, and yet it desires to be a map. The tension of the B’Seder project is the tension towards mapping something that cannot (or should not) be mapped.

Hypertext
If the B’Seder project lacks an apparent sense of cohesiveness, it may be worth looking at it from the perspective of hypertext writing. The web is, of course, the most commonly known
hypertext system, however many other examples of hypertext exist: computer games, interactive fiction, choose-your-own-adventure novels. To this list, I would add any text (or film or image or conversation) that has radical jump cuts that disrupt what would be a narrative arc. According to Espen J. Aarseth, a major theorist of new media, “the main feature of hypertext is discontinuity—the jump—the sudden displacement of the user’s position in the text.”

If we consider images as a kind of text, the field of semiotics suggests, then the objects in the B’Seder photomontage could be seen as a collection of nodes (or “textons” as Aarseth calls them). The movement from one object to the next in the storytelling sequence is the can of following or constructing a link in the hypertext structure. The overall work is like an experience of browsing through a Google search on “Polish and Jewish histories” or “Polish Jewish relations” or “Jewish history of Poland,” only from a predefined set of results. The photomontage is like a dumb database or an untrained neural network. The act of using the B’Seder system is the process of building a smarter hypertext that can (hopefully) reach a stage where it can transform into a singular, intelligent linear narrative.

Memory, Trauma and Storytelling

After memory palaces, the next key theory in this project relates to the importance of storytelling in psychotherapy. Pierre Janet, a contemporary of Freud, is known for having healed trauma victims using of storytelling to reconstruct past events. This early form of “talk therapy” recognized the importance of restructuring memory through narration.

[Pierre Janet distinguished] between two kinds of memory—“traumatic memory,” which merely and unconsciously repeats the past, and “narrative memory,” which narrates the past as past—[Janet validated] the idea that the goal of therapy is to convert “traumatic memory” into “narrative memory” by getting the patient to recount his or her history.

Further, Judith Herman writes:
In the second stage of recovery, the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story. Janet described normal memory as “the action of telling a story.” Traumatic memory, by contrast, is wordless and static. ... The ultimate goal ... is to put the story ... into words.  

This notion of traumatic memory being “wordless and static” while normal memory is the “action of telling a story” is key to the process of B’Seder. As described in the previous chapter, the first phase of B’Seder is the accumulation of fragmented anecdotes. The second phase involves organizing these anecdotes into a linear, sequential story. In fact, the very name of the project means both “okay” and “organized.” The goal of this project, like the goal of post-traumatic therapy, is to transform a disarray of stuck memories into an organized, meaningful narrative. B’Seder is, in a sense, both a therapeutic project and a writing project.

Traumatic memories can generate intrusive thoughts that invade one’s consciousness with intense emotions. Many trauma survivors speak of flashbacks accompanied by intense feelings of reliving a terrible event, as though these memories have a life of their own. It is, in fact, the very uncontrollable nature of these memories and emotions that make traumas traumatic. Although Janet promoted the idea of using therapy to “exorcise” traumatic memories — essentially removing them — contemporary psychoanalysts such as Herman promote the idea of “integration” instead. Integration means that the patient’s therapeutic process is aimed at “re-creating the flow” of their life story. Instead of removing the troubling memories, the act of constructing a narrated story of the past enables patients to smooth over the trauma and place it in perspective.

It is important to note here that the narration and storytelling suggested by Janet and Herman are the actual life events of the patient. The idea is not for the patient to heal through reading an account of someone else’s trauma, but for them to actually write and speak the story of their own suffering.
Another important quality of storytelling in addressing trauma is its potential for creating a psychological boundary between the past and the present. Eva Hoffman, writing about Polish/Jewish relations, describes this process:

_Psychoanalysis ... recognized that separating the past from the present is a considerable psychic accomplishment. Indeed, it can be said that the aim of memory-work in psychoanalysis is to establish the sense of the past, to understand the past consciously so that we do not have to struggle unconsciously under its dictates. On a broader scale, this is something that every generation has to do: understand its heritage in its own way and separate itself from it sufficiently so that it does not have to repeat it, or even invert it, inversion being often a camouflaged form of repetition._ 35

Rather than bringing painful memories into the present, this process of transforming memory through storytelling can reduce the intense effect of the memories and make them more manageable. Hoffman’s point about the task of every generation needing to understand its own heritage in its own way is key to Polish/Jewish relations as well as many other situations involving significant traumatic histories.

**Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma**

In the case of Polish and Jewish histories, the events of World War II may be old news, but many descendents continue to live with the effects of those times in a variety of ways. These intergenerational effects of trauma, of “secondary traumas,” are well documented in families of Shoah survivors. For example, survivors would often form unfulfilling “marriages of despair,” putting all their hopes and expectations on their children to fill the void of their lost relatives, causing substantial problems in their children’s sense of identity. 36 There is even growing evidence for tertiary traumas in grandchildren of survivors. 37

The concern of the long-range impacts of trauma is at the very core of _B'Seder_. To take the healing and conflict transformation beyond the specialized space of the therapist and mediator and into open, public spaces is the purpose of this art system. However, it is important to keep in
mind how this process itself can go wrong. Traumas can be transmitted through the very act of storytelling itself.

Traumatization of later generations can occur either through stories passed along or by lessons learned from experience. For example, a view of the world as a dangerous place can be transmitted without the patients ever knowing the roots of the feelings of lack of safety.38

Learning about the phenomenon of secondary traumas is not limited to the world of Polish and Jewish histories. Other violent conflicts and long-term cultural traumas hold important case studies. The intergenerational transmission of trauma in North American native communities, for example, is an area of active study and worth considering in future versions of B’Seder.

Transformative Mediation

Another core concept that informs this project is the idea of “transformative mediation,” as described by Joseph Folger and Robert Baruch Bush. Transformative mediation proposes an alternative to more traditional negotiation and conflict resolution methods, by setting aside agreement or resolution as the ultimate goal. Instead, the process focuses on improving the dynamics of communication and changing the form of the conflict through a variety of means. It enables the belligerents to determine for themselves what kind of outcome, in any, is necessary. Although this framework is intended for legal and diplomatic settings, I am exploring the possibility of making use of these ideas in an artistic context.

Folger and Bush summarize the approach of transformative mediation with ten principles, or “hallmarks.” The sections below summarize each of these ten hallmarks. In some cases, I’ve modified the title of the hallmark for clarity.
1) The Role of the Mediator
In the opening statement, the mediator should describe her role and objectives. As I see myself as a kind of mediator in this work, I have tried to similarly described my position in the second section of this paper.

2) The Outcome of Mediation
The second hallmark is that “it’s ultimately the parties’ choice” as to the outcomes of the mediation. This is perhaps the core principle that differentiates transformative mediation from other kinds of mediation and conflict resolution in general. Instead of focusing on a goal, the mediator looks for moments of “empowerment and recognition that may have been missed by the parties themselves.” For example, a mediator may encourage a participant to clarify something they’ve said, or point out a similarity with the other party’s point of view.

3) Power Imbalances & Suspension of Judgment
The third hallmark involves the mediator’s suspension of judgment about the parties’ views and decisions. Although this may seem like an insistence of the mediator being neutral, it is in fact an idea that acknowledges the impossibility of impartiality. Instead, this method encourages the mediator to “develop the ability both to recognize their own judgmental feelings when they arise and then to pull back and suspend judgment instead of exercising it.” Furthermore, “this awareness of relative ‘ignorance’ creates a sense of humility [in the mediator], which makes it easier to refrain from exercising judgment, and especially from overriding the parties’ judgment.”

This hallmark of suspension of judgment is no doubt made more difficult under certain conditions, such as when the mediator identifies more strongly with one side or the other, or when there are clearly uneven power relations between the two parties. Addressing the latter situation, Folger and Bush write:
It is easy for a third party [the mediator] to feel a need to defend and assist the apparently weaker party. However, this feeling involves judgments and assumptions on several levels: that the power balance is in fact what it seems to be, though power relations are often complex and multilayered; that the “powerful” party is being strategic or conniving, though he or she may actually be uncertain of how to act and relying on the power patterns that he or she would prefer to change; or that the weaker party wants a shift in the power balance, though he or she may actually prefer to change; or that the “weaker” party wants a shift in the power balance, though he or she may prefer the current situation for reasons unknown to the intervenor. And or all of these judgments, and the power-balancing strategies that they justify, lead to third-party moves that quickly negate empowerment in the transformative sense.53

This is a significant component of the transformative methodology — that there should be some kind of approach to dealing with situations where normally one might instinctively support one party. However, a different logic is needed if the disputing parties are going to feel enabled through the mediation process. Folger and Bush describe their approach by suggesting that “the mediator looks for, and inquires about, signals from a disputant that he or she is troubled by an imbalance or is unable to sustain a viable position without some change in the power balance.” A mediator who insists on changing the power relations without cues from either side is more of an intervenor than a mediator following the transformative approach.54

4) Optimism of Parties’ Competence and Motives
The next hallmark of transformative mediation involves the mediator begin optimistic about the parties’ motivations and their “ability to deal with their own situation on their own terms.”55

To frame the point differently, the mediator does not base his or her own view of the disputants on immediate appearances. The mediator sees the disputants on immediate appearances. The mediator sees the disputants, even in their worst moments, as being only temporarily disabled, weakened, defensive, or self-absorbed. The mediator is convinced that while the conflict may be causing the parties to be alienated from themselves and each other, it has not destroyed their fundamental ability to move—with assistance, but of their own volition—from weakness to strength or from self-absorption to recognition of others.56
Mediators using the transformative approach avoid what is known as the “fundamental attribution error.”\textsuperscript{57} This effect is a well-established idea in social psychology: the tendency for one to over-ascribe another person or group with attributes that are core to the others’ being—fundamental characteristics of those persons—instead of understanding those as environmental or situational factors. Fundamental attribution error does not claim that individuals have no innate characteristics, but rather it recognizes that people tend to assume that another’s characteristic is innate instead of thinking of it as the result of outside factors. Given that fundamental attribution error is an empirically-proven social phenomenon about our tendency to make false assumptions about others, it behooves those interested in improving relations between any two stereotypical groups to balance this out by over-ascribing the importance of environmental factors.

[mediators should] not attribute the parties’ difficulty in finding their way through the conflict to their “bad character” as inherently weak, hateful, or uncaring people. Rather, they attribute the parties’ ineffective behavior to the circumstantial effects of the experience of conflict itself.

When a mediator notices one of the parties behaving in an ill intentioned or destructive way, the suggested course of action is the same as with the previous discussion on unbalanced power relations: the mediator should take their lead from the reactions of the participants.\textsuperscript{58}

5) Emotional Possibilities

Unlike many other training methods that encourage mediators to control and deflect emotional expressions, transformative mediation views emotion as an integral component of its process.\textsuperscript{59} According to Folger and Bush, mediators trained in this method are “prepared to work with expressions of emotion as the conflict evolves,” not as a form of therapy, but as opportunities to reach the “transformative goals of empowerment and recognition.”\textsuperscript{60} Instead of encouraging emotions as a means for “venting” or getting rid of “emotional static”, the transformative method encourages delving into the situations and events that gave rise to them in order for participants to gain control over their situations and more fully describe their views of each other.\textsuperscript{61}
6) Clarity from Confusion

Another hallmark is expecting that participants may “frequently be unclear and uncertain about the issues underlying their conflict, what they want from each other, and what would be the ‘right’ choices for them.” Allowing parties to explore the sources of their confusion may in fact lead to key moments of transformation.

One experienced mediator made a somewhat paradoxical observation. She suggested that it is not always helpful to assume that one understands a dispute too soon in an intervention. As she has gained experience in the third-party role, she has come to believe that she is probably doing well during mediation when “she is not sure what the dispute is about after an hour or so into a session.” Rather than feeling a sense of panic about this ambiguity, she now feels comfortable it and sees it, in some ways, as a sign of her ability to keep control in the parties’ hands. Her comfort with ambiguity allows her to remain open, well into a session, to the parties’ need to clarify the issues for themselves and what they want to do about them. It allows her to give the parties time to clarify for themselves what the conflict is about.

“The mediator is comfortable with having the parties take considerable time to sort through the conflict, and the mediator can accept the lack of closure if the disputants cannot reach a clear understanding of what the past has been about or what the future should be.”

7) Here and Now

This hallmark encourages the mediator to keep the focus on the disputants’ decision-making and perspective taking place in the immediate mediation space instead of “backing up to a broader view,” or working on solving the problem on a more abstract level. The importance here is on shared space, shared time (the present) and shared attention. (Below I discuss how this hallmark might be adjusted to electronically mediated environments.) Part of the strategy of keeping the mediation session focused on the “here and now” is paying attention to “how the disputants want to be seen, what is important to them, why these issues matter, what choices they want to make.” Whenever parties “are unclear, where choices are presented, where parties feel misun-
derstood” the mediator should slow down the discussion and work with parties on “clarification, decision making, communication and perspective taking.” Here it is worth noting that Folger and Bush describe the option of working with the parties separately or together. The notion of slowness and separation will be important below where I discuss the proposed application of this methodology.

8) The Past is Valuable to the Present

The mediator should also encourage participants to talk about past events. Recalling the history of the conflict can lead to substantial recognition and empowerment for both parties. Instead of “opening old wounds,” it may, in fact, lead to substantial transitions in the conflict.

Statements about who did what to whom ... reflect the parties’ characterizations of both self and other in the present. In these statements, the parties are saying who they are, and who each thinks the other party is, today. These kinds of statements lay a crucial foundation for whatever recognition the parties may choose to give one another—for example, for reconsidering and revising their views of each other’s motives, conduct, or character.

When parties review the past, they frequently reveal to themselves (and each other) their choices at various points along the way. They become aware of key turning points, as well as resources and options that were available to them but went unnoticed. When this awareness is achieved, disputants often take a new look at the resources, choices, and abilities currently available to them, which is a step toward empowerment.

9) Conflict as a Long-Term Process

It is important to view the intervention as one point in a larger sequence of conflict interaction. Conflicts have long histories and will likely continue in some form after the mediation intervention.

In practical terms, this means that the mediators view the intervention as one point within a longer time frame. They do not view the intervention as resolution of the
entire conflict. This long-term view of conflict, and the attitude of acceptance of and calmness about the limits and vicissitudes of intervention, is another hallmark of transformative practice.70

Seeing the intervention as one point in a stream of conflict interaction also gives third parties an awareness of the cycles that conflict interaction is likely to go through. Third parties following a transformative approach expect disputants to move toward and away from each other (and a possible agreement) as the conflict, and the intervention, unfolds. This means that mediators do not fear failure when progress toward reaching an agreement stalls or deteriorates. They do not panic when parties come close to committing themselves to an agreement and then back away quickly or unexpectedly, even near the end of an intervention.71

10) Small Steps Count

The value of any settlement may be illusory, since it is probably built on the shaky sands of third-party directiveness. At the same time, they are convinced that, at the microlevel of empowerment and recognition, even small steps count, and they notice, and attach importance to, each step the parties have made along these two dimensions. Finally, when no agreement is reached, the intervenor realizes that actionable commitments can be—and often are—made by the parties even after the intervention if real steps toward empowerment and recognition have occurred during the process.72

At this point, it may be valuable to return to the recommendations of Rafael Scharf about the importance of creating a space for Poles and Jews to speak their minds.

If a means has been found for Poles and Jews to meet on neutral ground, it is important that they should tell each other what most concerns them, not for the sake of recrimination and rhetoric, but in order to come closer to the truth. ... There was a time when the Poles could say publicly what they liked (or more usually what they did not like) about the Jews. The Jews had to swallow it or resort, in debate, to codes or euphemisms. It is a relief to be able to talk about it all openly and frankly. All too often Poles, among themselves, speak of Jews differently from the way they speak in public (especially as, for the time being, anti-Semitism is not deemed respectable), and so do Jews with regard to Poles. It is time we freed ourselves of this double-think and double-talk and abandoned the stereotypes.73
A Media Heater

Unlike most design projects, the outcome of *B’Seder* is not as important as the process itself. The medium is the message and the message is one of participation and transformation. The process is the product of the project, and the process is likely to change. To continue McLuhan’s terminology for a moment, *B’Seder* starts off as a cool medium and ends up hot. *B’Seder* is a heater.

*B’Seder* is a medium for cooking media.

McLuhan defined cool media as media that must be “filled or completed by the audience.” A hot medium, on the other hand, is one that “extends one single sense in ‘high definition’” and require little participation of the audience. McLuhan was reticent to place an overall value judgement on these two broad categories—each plays a distinct and valuable role in human communication.

Pierre Janet described how the healing of a trauma can be brought about by transforming traumatic memory into narrative memory. This act of transitioning one form of memory to another by recalling, composing and speaking a truthful story, is not unlike translating one medium into another. McLuhan’s theoretical framework of hot and cool media gives us a lighter and more playful lens through which to look at the *B’Seder* system. Polish and Jewish histories do feature highly traumatized moments, but it is important to keep in mind that many Poles and Jews have not been directly affected by violent trauma. Furthermore, the *B’Seder* project may well be applied in the future to less consequential cultural conflicts such as those between sports teams or between rival educational institutions such as MIT and that place for trust fund kids up the river. To view *B’Seder* as a morphing inter-media shape-shifter is pretty sexy. It starts a cool medium and gets hotter and hotter. At first: a conversation, then another conversation, then a seminar, an installation, an imaginary space, the beginnings of a memory palace, an in-progress photomontage, a finished image, a finished memory palace, a public performance, a simple story, a lecture, a book, a film.

*B’Seder* is a medium for cooking cultural conflict.
B’нЕDER

B’Seder is a methodology for mediating cultural conflict through artistic processes. Although the system could potentially mediate other scenarios, B’Seder is currently intended for recomposing dissonances among Polish and Jewish participants. The methodology focuses on historical narratives as well as personal ones, and uses collaborative image-making as a primary technique. Its essential component, however, is the action of storytelling. If B’Seder were reduced to a bare minimum, it would be a story. However B’Seder is many things. It is currently a specific series of photomontage images started in the fall of 2010; it is a design for a memory palace; it is a series of performances, storytelling events and conversations; it is a repeatable methodology. When it comes to the photomontage and other artefacts of the project, I simply title each of them “B’Seder,” along with their production date. The events, likewise are entitled B’Seder, as is the system itself. All of these things are B’Seder.

B’seder? B’seder.

Although the B’Seder system is intended for application to any number of other post-conflict communities dealing with contested historical narratives, this first iterations of B’Seder are focused on concerns close to my own experience: the history and present relations between Polish and Jewish communities.
The aim of this project is to investigate the possibilities for using contemporary art in service of increasing Polish-Jewish dialog on contentious and contested issues, as well as producing narratives that connect their overlapping histories with present realities. In many ways Poles are simply unaware, on a detailed level, of how “an authentic part of their Poland was obliterated” in the Shoah. The project is also an opportunity to bring to Jewish communities stories of a Poland, past and present, that can hopefully deepen their connection with their own family histories. It may be a chance for some kind of peace through mutual recognition and empowerment. Of course, this optimistic bridge-building work would be entirely naive without looking into the darker realities of this field of inquiry, not the least of which is the topic of Polish anti-Semitism.

The first stage of this work involves using the concept of the memory palace as a method for collecting narratives within the artist’s subjective position as storyteller. A photomontaged image will be used as an accumulation surface for the building blocks of the memory palace. This image will undergo a continual process of transformation as the artist performs the work for new audiences, encouraging dialog on the stories presented. The collage will be initially quite naïve and disorganized so as to privilege no single clear narrative, but rather offer up many paths through its jumbled terrain. Further, the print will be a portable artwork, with a carefully designed container that may give a further descriptive framework to the project.

The next stage of this project, as described in the System Design chapter, will involve the production of a linear narrative experience. This may take the form of a performance, a film or an installation. The first portion of the project will inform this stage by taking a clearer stance on the topics accumulated and build a linear narrative through the terrain accumulated in the photomontage.

At the time of the writing of this document the B’Seder work has been presented twelve times using a large-format (4’ x 5’) photograph as the basis for the work. The image depicts an interior space with a collection of mnemonic objects within it that stand in for a wide variety of stories of interest to this researcher. I will carry the latest version of this print into various communities as a
kind of map to guide conversation and storytelling with the people I interact with. These conversations will in turn affect the project as I revise the image after each set of interactions.

The idea is to create a symbolic image space that I (and eventually others) can use as a memory aid to then carry stories, narratives and histories (harmonious and conflicting) into new spaces. The impulse to create a medium for propaganda or proselytizing will, of course, have to be somehow checked. Further below I describe how new media techniques can be employed to bring voices and memories of people from other places around the globe into the work.

The space of Polish/Jewish dialog has grown substantially since the fall of the Soviet system and the country’s entrance to the EU. B’Seder is continuing the momentum already started by many others who are interested in improving relations between these communities. One could see this work also as a kind of living memorial to the overlapping histories of Poles and Jews. No dialog between Jews and Poles can avoid the Shoah, of course, nor indeed deny its central place in our shared histories, so this work is involved in the question of how new generations will remember this event, not that we are on the cusp of losing the last remaining witnesses of this cataclysmic moment. The work also aims to look beyond this abyss to other more positive connections with the history and future of Poland — a place that was once the center of the Jewish world.

Etymology of the Title

The title, “B’Seder,” is a common Hebrew word which is colloquially used to mean “ok” and is also rooted in the word “order” as in “to put things into alphabetical order.” This word serves to
Above:
B'Seder. Oct 12/2010
Storytelling performance with projected photomontage

Opposite:
B'Seder. Oct 12/2010
Photomontage
guide the central process of the project: a move from disarray towards organization. As described in the section on trauma therapy, this is not only a way of collaborating on an artistic process, but hopefully a means for healing some of the “stuck, conflicting memories” that Eva Hoffman described at the beginning of this text.

The title also recalls the use of the word “seder” to describe the meal of Passover, a religious festival about emancipation. The word seder is rooted in the very establishment of the Jewish nation. In this sense, I hope this project can bring about a freedom, on some small scale, for the Poles and Jews involved in this project from the intense problem areas of our shared histories, and do so in an ethically conscious manner. The idea is not to pave over our histories, but to share them and empower each other through them.

User Tests
The B’Seder project has been enacted about a dozen times in various forms since its inception. In the sections below, I describe each instance of the work. Each of these presentations is both an iteration of the story accumulation phase of the project as well as a chance to test and improve the design of the medium as a whole. Continuing the vocabulary of interaction design from the earlier section, these events are like user tests of design iterations. Observations from each session are used to modify subsequent version of the work.

The following sections are documentations of experiments with the B’Seder project. They are progress work, not final a final product.

Oct 12/2010
This first “user test” was an attempt to explore the possibilities of a memory palace. I used the photomontage method to encode and recall exclusively personal narratives about the life of my paternal grandmother, who had passed away just a few months earlier. I registered a number of
anecdotes that were important to my memory of her and encoded them in the image as objects. This event was a kind of storytelling performance where I unpacked the objects as narratives in front of an audience of peers.

The lobster, for example, related to a story about her first job in Canada after emigrating from Poland. The peacock stood in for some anecdotes of her farm and the animals she kept there. Overall, the image was a sparse sketch for the method that I continued to use throughout the B'Seder project, namely: the image-based collection -> encoding -> decoding process.

This first test of the project made it clear that a collection of anecdotes alone do not make a good story, or a fluid narrative. This performance became something of a eulogy for my grandmother, whose amazing story as a resistance fighter in the Warsaw uprising, a rally car racer, a scientist and a warm-hearted matriarch simply needed to be told. Her story is a kind of introduction into my own Polish narrative and the shared narratives of the nation.

Oct 20/2010

In this version of B'Seder I used the same background image, although this time with entirely different objects—departing from the subject of my grandmother and accumulating anecdotes relating to more general aspects of Polish and Jewish histories. Instead of projecting the image, I made a large inkjet print. The choice of a printed format was significant in order to create a work that would be easily portable. I could easily roll up the print and take it to show others, using it as a conversation piece and index for stories I wanted to retell and speak through.

The Toolbox

The objects and anecdotes I chose for this version of the photomontage related to my own nascent experience of reading about Polish and Jewish history, theology, and literature. In particular, the topic of Shoah history had always been something of a taboo subject for some reason. The very act of cracking open books on the subject and then selecting anecdotes to visually encode and retransmit to others was quite a daunting, and emotionally charged task. For example, trying
This Page:
B'Seder, Oct 20/2010
Storytelling performance with inkjet photomontage as a poster

Opposite:
B'Seder, Oct 20/2010
Inkjet photomontage, 40" x 50"
to explain the difference between the word “Shoah” and “Holocaust” to a group of my peers and advisors was an unexpectedly intense emotional experience.

On the black toolbox in the image, I added the Hebrew word “shoah,” which means “catastrophe,” and is the word often used in the Jewish world to refer to the Holocaust. The root of the word “holocaust” means “a burnt sacrifice or offering,” which is a troubling meaning when applied to the events of World War II. The Holocaust was a great human catastrophe, but it was no holocaust. I try, whenever possible, to use the word “Shoah” instead of “Holocaust.”

My choice of placement of the inscription within the image, on the black toolbox, was a purely intuitive one. A later conversation with a visitor to my studio evoked some interesting conversations about how the Shoah has become a kind of tool in public rhetoric.

The Prism Light
The strength of this work is its confluence of personal, collective and universal themes from a variety of sources including film, literature, visual art, scholarly writing.

For example, one element of this first image was the rainbow light that was cast in the top left corner of the image. I placed it there as a reference to Adorno’s saying that “after Auschwitz there can be no more poetry,” which he published in a journal called Prism, hence the refracted light. Upon decoding this object in the print, one of the people present elaborated saying that he was certain that Adorno meant that after Auschwitz, there can be no more poetry in German. This led to a discussion of the work of Paul Celan. Each of these accumulations are now a part of the work. The act of storytelling is also the act of collecting new stories and ideas through the presence of being in a room with other people. This was the first time this project began to take shape as an interactive medium, and it became clear that in-person interaction was to be much more important than an electronic conversation.

Exodus 20:2-5
One of my own early (and ongoing) subjects of study in Judaism was the proscription against the creation of images, as described in Exodus 20:2-5 and throughout the Torah.
Encountering this commandment for the first time revealed a potentially direct conflict between two of my identities: the artist and the Jew. If I were not to make a “graven image,” how could I be an artist?

After some research and consultation, this commandment became less and less clear to me. Many sages had written interpretations of this law over the centuries, which varied from the extreme (make no visual depictions of any form), to very relaxed (depict whatever you like, just be careful not to worship those images). Without having a deep knowledge of this commandment, I decided to continue on the basis that I would depict no human form (Maimonides says depict no human form in its entirety) in this project, and keep an awareness of the potential for this work of art to become idolatrous in some way.

Like much of the rest of this project, this aspect of the photomontage began from a place of naivété, with a mind towards becoming more knowledgeable through its continued production.

The Pile of Books
This group of books is a selection of a few of the most important texts, to me, in this project. They are a starting point for recounting my readings with others and conversing on the topics that other more skilled and knowledgeable authors put to paper in the past.

Elie Weisel’s Nobel Prize-winning book, Night, and Art Speigelman’s graphic novel, Maus, represent the voices of Jewish survivors of the Shoah, writing from French and American perspectives, respectively. Rafael Scharf’s book was the first text I had ever read from a Polish Jewish perspective that is both deeply nostalgic for a pre-war Poland and highly critical of Polish anti-Semitism. It is also a book that lays down some of the possible foundations for Polish/Jewish reconciliations. It was a breath of fresh air in amongst all the stories of Polish nationalistic heroism that I was accustomed to at the time.
Boi/ho
TaP~s:
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B'Seder, Nov 23/2010
Performance with projection from The
Big Lebowski and inkjet photomon-
tage as a floor map, 40" x 50"
Z Falszym Ausweisem is one such important text about a key moment of Polish national identity. The book is a memoir written by Stanislaw Jankowski (the deputy Prime Minister of Poland at the time) about the Warsaw Uprising and depicts both of my father’s parents in their roles under his command. The book on the top of the pile is Bertrand Russell’s History of Western Philosophy, the one and only possession of my grandfather’s that I own. It represents to me the foundational humanistic beliefs of my grandfather and is a reminder of how strongly Poland, despite being on the Eastern edge of Europe, strives to belong to Western traditions and identity. The remaining books are by and about the work of a two significant Polish contemporary artists who have worked with topics relating to the aftermath of violent conflict.

Nov 23/2010
This performance took place in two sections. The first involved the use of a film clip, the second was a reading of the photomontage print from October 20th. This time my audience was a different set of MIT students. For the first half, I projected a scene from the Coen Brother’s, The Big Lebowski. This 1998 film is widely considered a film-noire cult classic and stars Jeff Bridges as Lebowski, a stoner anti-hero and unwitting murder investigator. Throughout the movie he introduces himself simply as The Dude. For my performance, I took on the role of Walter, The Dude’s sidekick—a Vietnam veteran with what one might call “serious anger management issues.” Each of Walter’s lines were dropped from the audio track and I performed them as a voice-over.

In this scene we learn that Walter is a Polish Catholic convert to Judaism. Here is a transcript:

WALTER

Okay, but how does all this add up to an emergency?

DUDE

Huh?
WALTER

I'm saying, I see what you're getting at, Dude, he kept the money, but my point is, here we are, it's shabbas, the sabbath, which I'm allowed to break only if it's a matter of life and death--

DUDE

Walter, come off it. You're not even fucking Jewish, you're--

WALTER

What the fuck are you talking about?

DUDE

You're fucking Polish Catholic--

WALTER

What the fuck are you talking about? I converted when I married Cynthia! Come on, Dude!

DUDE

Yeah, and you were--

WALTER

You know this!

DUDE

And you were divorced five fucking years ago.

WALTER
Yeah? What do you think happens when you get divorced? You turn in your library card? You get a new driver’s license? You stop being Jewish?

DUDE

This driveway.

AS HE TURNS:

WALTER

I’m as Jewish as fucking Tevye

DUDE

It’s just part of your whole sick Cynthia thing. Taking care of her fucking dog. Going to her fucking synagogue. You’re living in the fucking past.

WALTER

Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax—you’re goddamn right I live in the past! I–Jesus. What the hell happened?

The scene ends with the car turning into the driveway to the discovery of another car crashed into a fountain in from of the mansion. What the hell happened? A good question.

My intention with inhabiting this scene was to bring to life some of the absurd humor of Walter’s situation, which was similar to my own and of others like me. It would be hard to imagine anyone further from Jewish than a Polish Catholic. The very proximity of Polish and Jewish communities for the last thousand years has given rise to strong interpersonal identity boundaries as each group maintained its distance and autonomy through various means. Jewish religious
law, the halakha, has a long tradition of establishing and maintaining boundaries through variety of means such as marriage, clothing, and dietary laws. Likewise, Polish Catholic communities, it seems, maintained their own boundaries vis-a-vis the Jews through informal systems like humor, and more institutional means such as Numerus Clausus which limited the number of Jewish students admitted to universities.

Considering the distance between the two communities, the film scene between The Dude and Walter becomes even more ridiculous when it becomes clear that Walter converted for marriage and decided to remain within the Jewish community after his divorce. This kind of stubborn religious piety seems to me, ironically, a very Polish attitude.

And yet, Walter’s comment that he is “as Jewish as Tevye” — the protagonist of Fiddler on the Roof — is an important point. Being Polish Catholic means sharing many similar cultural reference points as Polish Jews, although often unbeknownst to both. The Dude’s attitude doubting Walter’s new identity is a voice that most converts likely deal with, and yet being Polish immediately puts one in proximity of various kinds with being Jewish. Being Polish can make one as Jewish as Tevye.

Nov 27/2010

This was the first revision of the photomontage where I added new objects. Through my readings and conversations I decided to bring in five new elements: the certificate on the wall, the menu leaning against the black box, the pot of cholent, the red flag and the silver briefcase.

The Pot of Cholent

Cholent is a classic Ashkenazi dish that is intended especially for the Sabbath. It is a stew made typically with beef and a variety beans and other vegetables, often with whole eggs left inside to hard boil. Cholent is started on Friday afternoon and left on the stove to a low flame overnight and throughout Saturday. It’s rich, hearty taste and slow cook time makes it perfect for feeding a small family over the course of Shabbat, without breaking the interdiction against lighting a fire.
Opposite:
B'Seder, Nov 27/2010
Inkjet photomontage, 40" x 50"
Opposite:
B’Seder, Dec 15/2010
Inkjet photomontage, 88” x 110”
Cholent is also a term that has begun to be used in Poland recently to describe a new generation who are growing up and learning about Jewish family roots that had remained hidden or unspoken for some time. Some of these young people are Jewish by the matrilineal definition of Jewishness, others have less direct Jewish ancestry, but have found a strong interest in learning more about this unknown part of their heritage. The term “cholent” has come to stand for this group of young Poles who are in various mixed ways, newly Jewish, with a dawning awareness of its meaning.

Dec 15/2010
In this revision, I added the Solidarność logo, the photo on the wall of the lobby of the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews, the two posters of the Krakow Jewish Cultural Festival, the teepee postcard, the silhouette, the memory chip, the capo, and the landmines.

The Menu, The Teepee Postcard and The Festival Posters
The Jewish “revival” movement in Poland is connected to this sensation that some have described as a kind of a cultural “phantom limb.” Ashkenazi-themed restaurants exist today in the country, but they don’t serve kosher food.

Music festivals exist, but some of the melodies are hauntingly repetitive.

The question of eating and food is close to the heart of this project as well. Kashrut dietary laws are about cleanliness but also about the ethic of separation.

The Museum Lobby Photo
This image depicts the lobby of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, currently under construction in Warsaw. I chose to depict it here as a cue to discuss the potential of the building and as a means for thinking about other memorials and monuments to Polish and Jewish histories.

The museum was designed by the Finnish architect Rainer Mahlamäki and is situated in the center of a public park that had, for decades, been a highly visible symbolic site. At the head of the park is a massive stone relief sculpture depicting heroes of the ghetto uprising in 1943. This

Above:
Two sections of the B’Seder, Dec 15/2010 photomontage
huge obelisk was, for a long time, the city’s most noticeable referent to Jewish culture. In a city that was once a third Jewish, the absence of Jews and objects and sites referring to their substantial presence is highly palpable once one starts to seek these things in Warsaw.

The new Museum will soon fill this noticeable void with what is likely to be the city’s most dramatic work of architecture since the erection of the Soviet “Palace of Culture.” The building’s overall form is a square block, but with its primary feature being the interior Core Exhibition Hall. The hall begins on the side of the memorial and follows a long organic path to the opposite side of the building where a large dramatic glass wall displays the rest of the park.

This primary line through the building recalls a cavern eroded by the passage of a large river, or a large crack in the earth, not unlike Doris Salcedo’s work Shibboleth at the entrance hall of the Tate Modern. The following text from the Museum’s mission statement describes the symbolic meaning of its core passageway.

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews will be a portal, a place to begin an exploration of the world of Polish Jews. It will be a forum, a place of dialogue and civic engagement. It will be a catalyst that inspires visitors to reflect on the personal and historical significance of the civilization of Polish Jews and take action to recover this legacy for future generations. The Museum of the History of Polish Jews will confront hatred, promote moral responsibility and democratic values. The Museum will harness the emotional power of this site to animate dialogue about the past in relation to the present and the future.

Upon showing B’Seder to an Israeli whose family had come from Poland, he remarked how my project gave him very little reason or interest in connecting through it with his own roots. This is clearly something that I need to address in the future. There was nothing in B’Seder at that stage that held much meaning for him about Jewish life in Poland from before it was extinguished. For him it was too similar to the stories and aesthetic of existing Holocaust museums. Perhaps the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will help produce some meaningful stories and general information to help extending this side of B’Seder.

The Museum’s mission statement continues:
As an international educational institution, cultural center, and singular meeting place for a diverse public, the Museum will provide a unique learning environment through a cutting-edge multimedia narrative exhibition, lively public programs, a resource center, education programs, and collaborative projects that engage a broad public in Poland and abroad in the recovery and exploration of the legacy of Polish Jews. Polish visitors will see their history and the places where they live today in a new way. They will discover that the history of Poland is not complete without a history of Polish Jews. They will become acutely aware that their towns once had large and lively Jewish communities. They will discover the rich civilization that Jews created on Polish soil. For Jews across the globe, so many of whom have roots in Poland, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will add depth and resonance to their visit to Poland and to their understanding of the Holocaust by presenting not only how Jews died, but also how they lived. All visitors will discover the vibrant civilization of what was once the largest Jewish community in the world and center of the Jewish Diaspora.  

The mission of the Museum is very closely connected to the aims of the B’Seder project. It may even be an ideal site for a future iteration of the project.

Of course, before the construction of the Museum, there were other monuments to the histories of Polish Jews, although they were small and easy to miss unless you knew what you were looking for. Small stone plinths could be found in some parts of Warsaw, like the one pictured in the margin. But in a way, the whole city is a kind of monument to absence. It was almost entirely redesoyed by the Germans. Julian Tuwim, a Polish poet wrote in his work *We Polish Jews*, the following thought about memorializing the Shoah.

*There will stand - in Warsaw, and in every other Polish city, a remaining, permanent and conserved fragment of the ghetto in an unchanged form, just as we find it in all its horror of smoldering embers and destruction.*

And indeed many Polish cities have preserved portions of their ghettos. In Warsaw, a city that was largely ghetto space, retains today very little in an unchanged form. One exception is Próżna Street. Not only is ulica Próżna one of the most visible remnants of the Warsaw Ghetto, but the name itself is a monument to Polish anti-Semitism. The word “próżna” means “vain” or “proud,” which is a not uncommon Polish perspective on the Jewish character. Pride, of course, is one of
the seven deadly sins in Christian belief. Creating a deeper understanding of anti-Semitism and stereotypes and racism in general could be one of the tangential benefits of the B’Seder project. While the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews (is there really only one history?) seems to be taking on a much more cheerful and positive view of the future of the Polish/Jewish relationship, it remains to be seen how directly it will contend with the grit of anti-Semitism in Poland’s past and present. Questions of poverty and wealth dominate anti-Semitic rhetoric, for example. To what extent will these themes be explored in full depth? This should be an ethical marker. When has the wealth (real or perceived) of other people been used as an excuse for serious moral transgressions?

**The Memory Chip**

A tiny smart card memory chip was also added into the photomontage in order to bring the topic of cryptography and the protection of memory to the work. A memory chip is also a security device that stores encrypted information. This led me to thinking about the Marrano Jews of the Spanish Inquisition who were forced to hide their religious identities in order to avoid persecution. This historical moment brought forth a number of questions. Who were the Marranos of Poland? Who was Jewish in Poland but had to hide their identity in order to survive? Who were Polish Marranos by choice, and who were Marranos by having been orphaned and adopted?

This mnemonic object is the marker of the beginning of a number of future conversations on some of these topics.

**Jan 26/2011**

This event was the first open, public iteration of B’Seder. It took place at MIT during the Independent Activities Period and was sponsored in part by the Institute’s Hillel club for Jewish students. Using the most recent print of the image as a tablecloth, I served food and led discussions on a variety of the topics embedded in the image. The foods chosen for the event were selected...
Both Pages:
B'Seder, Jan 26/2011
Storytelling and conversation with borscht, latkes and inkjet photomontage as a tablecloth.
Far Left:
Ian Wojtowski
Ubu Next, Feb 11/2011
Storytelling performance with bat

Below:
Władysław Łuczczkiewicz
Kazimierz the Great
visiting Esther. 1870
oil painting, 35" x 31"
Right:
Jan Wojtowicz
Ubu Next (Je ne suis ni Kazimierz Wielki ni Stanczyk ni Karski ni Jar-ry ni un Homard). Feb 11/2011
Inkjet print. 47” x 35”

Below:
Jan Matejko
Stan•czyk, 1862
oil painting. 47” x 35”

Bottom:
Frédéric Nauczyciel
Production Still for Jan Karski (Mon nom est une fiction). 2011
Photograph
as foundational items in both Polish and Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine: kosher borscht/barszcz and latkes/placki.

Among some of the more interesting conversation tangents was an anecdote about the similarity between Polish and Israeli customer service and the provocative thought that “Poland is a Holocaust survivor.”

Feb 11/2011
This event was slight divergence from the B’Seder project, but I include it here because it is relevant to later presentations of the project. This performance involved the creation of a persona called Ubu Next—an amalgamation of Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi and the historical figures Stańczyk and King Kazimierz the Great. Using text derived from previous performances of B’Seder, I created a storytelling session without the aid of the photomontage, using only my voice and a musical instrument for texture.

This performance took place in Montreal at an event called Salon d’art performance royale, where a dozen artists performed various original work on the theme of royalty. My contribution was a kind of hypothetical question about who a new king of Poland would be, if there were to be one. What sort of understanding, character and opinions would such a being possess if I were to vote for him (Poland has a history of electing its kings).

Mar 14/2011
This version of B’Seder involved the production of a digital media component. It had become clear at this stage that many of the people who should be involved in B’Seder were spread throughout the world and a process for connecting them through electronic means would need to be built. So I developed a system that had two primary components, both accessed using a web browser: a panning and zooming tool for exploring the B’Seder photomontage in detail, and a chat system for discussing the work. I had plan for an editing component to the system, but this was never built.
The size of the photomontage image file is approximately 2GB, making it very cumbersome to view and edit. In order to be able share it easily with others, a special display system would have to be used. I settled on the technology that drives Google Maps—a system that makes it easy to navigate very high resolution images by resampling the image to different densities and displaying it as a collection of tiles that are loaded as needed. Using a web browser to view B’Seder with the Google Maps system is many times faster than using PhotoShop and with the added benefit that it can be transmitted instantly around the world as a web page.

On top of the map, I layered a simple text-based chat system. People looking at the image at the same time could talk to one another and browse previous conversations. The system also filtered conversations based on what part of the image people were zoomed into. If you were looking at the postcard object, you would only chat with other people who were also looking at the postcard object.

There was intentionally no explanatory text about each object, as the objective was to build a system that relied exclusively on live conversation instead of prerecorded content. This quickly proved to be confusing and ineffective because of the lack of 24 hour attendance of the chat area by a storyteller. So, as a partial solution to this, a system of text provocations was developed. If someone was not actively using the chat, it would prompt the user with conversation starters, such as “Poland is a monument to the dangers of anti-Semitism.” or “Are ‘Polish’ and ‘Jewish’ mutually exclusive categories?”

Another crucial component of the project was the sound design of the work and how this affected the physical surroundings of people using the system. Every time an automatic conversation suggestion was used by a participant, a sound effect would play. If you were using the system in a room alone, the sound effect would be a single event. If you were using the system in a computer lab, each computer would ring with melodic sound. By virtue of using the system with others, this web-based version of B’Seder would become something akin to an orchestra. Although the system enabled isolated communication, it truly came alive when it is used in a shared space.
Welcome, Wotowicz.

If you pan around, you'll notice the chat history change.

I mean i see changes in the photo for sure, i am asking about the coding.

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Both Pages:

B'Seder, Mar 14/2011

Storytelling and conversation performance with photomontage (website zoom interface and chat)
Welcome, Ian Wojtowicz

pelintan: host/guest relation
pelintan: there should be no conditions in host/guest relation
fourquarecomshare: my sister believes that the host should serve the guest... first and then the host
fourquarecomshare: especially a male guest
fourquarecomshare: I agree with you, Pelin

---

fourquarecomshare: What are the Hebrew themes in the music of Shostakovich? I really like it
fourquarecomshare: Ian, I really like this
fourquarecomshare: Congratulations
fourquarecomshare: I hope you access this on my own computer!
Ian Wojtowicz: Damn
Ian Wojtowicz: ?
Ian Wojtowicz: There are people who have lived in a world where
Both Pages:
B'Seder, Mar 14/2011
Storytelling and conversation performance with photomontage (website zoom interface and chat)
Finally, the chat system, like most, allowed participants to choose a nickname to represent themselves online. The effect of this technique is well documented in Sherry Turkle’s book, *Life on the Screen*. Anonymity allows for a certain degree of experimentation and role-playing to “try out” new ideas and identities in a relatively safe environment. The drawback, of course, is the potential for participants to be less invested in the value or outcome of their simulated worlds. The great thing about a group of people using computers together in a shared space is the ability to very subtly blend the degree of online anonymous personas with the complexities of face-to-face interaction. Using this chat system in a computer lab allows for text to be a channel of anonymous speech, which voice conversations with others in the room carry the speaker’s full identity.

Looking back on the design of this first version and the group user testing conducted on March 14th, there are a few components that need to be reconsidered. The text prompts were a little overbearing, and there was also no easy way to interrupt the chat and tell a story to everyone present. The user test (with about twenty users) was a highly cacophonous, chaotic moment of intense simultaneous communication. A lot of conversational ground was covered in a short period of time, with little overall movement towards a unified narrative. Perhaps that’s okay.

The next version should be more tightly crafted towards the stories of the objects in the image and should include more structure to indicate who is speaking and where each participant is looking.

Editing was also a major missing component to the image. There should be some processes available to allow for the modification of the image itself.

Once the system is in a more resilient form, careful consideration should also be given to who should participate in the next user tests.
Apr 16/2011
This instance of B'Seder took place at Boston University’s Photographic Resource Center in April 2011 as part of a group exhibition of photographic work. For the show, I prepared a portable mounting system using the latest version of the image at in a 6' banner format.

Along with the work, I posted this text:

B’Seder is an evolving photomontage about Polish and Jewish histories and their complex present. The image is printed on a regular basis, and changes over time. It currently depicts an interior space in an indeterminate state of construction containing arranged objects. The objects stand-in for narratives of the historical terrain in question. Some of the narratives originate from the artist’s life, and some come from other people, gleaned from conversations, readings and films.

This combination of interior space and mnemonic objects in the image makes reference to the ancient narrative technique of the memory palace. Using this system, orators could remember hundreds of pages of text by constructing imaginary spatial architectures that they could “walk through” as they recalled the information. The memory palace occurs as an important device in many cultural moments, such as Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, and Joshua Foer’s current bestselling book Moonwalking With Einstein.

The photomontage changes slowly over time through in-person storytelling conversations and online interactions. The project website accumulates conversations and visual edits made to the image by the participating public. This process, informed loosely by the theory of transformative mediation, aims to create a social/artistic framework for repairing post-conflict societies in a time of instant, decentralized global communication.

woj.com/bseder

The artist will be present to speak with visitors at the following times:

Saturday, April 16th from Noon to 2pm
Tuesday, April 19th from Noon to 2pm
Saturday, April 23rd from Noon to 2pm
Both Pages:
B'Seder, Apr 16/2011
Storytelling performance with ink-jet photomontage in banner mode
This was the first time that I presented the work in public and in a format where I was seated next to the work, almost like a gallery docent. This format gave me an opportunity to meet visitors to the gallery—some who had come to meet me, some who happened to wander in. After a few sessions of sitting with the work and interacting with visitors, I developed a methodology that alternated between a kind of performative oratory and a question answering mode.

After moments of prolonged silence, I would begin to recite text from Julian Tuwim, Eva Hoff- man, Rafael Scharf, Alfred Jarry, and Witold Gombrowicz. This would alienate some visitors and intrigue others.

“The Auschwitz dance video. Have you all seen that?”

In the absence of this introduction, a common initial question in face of the image would be “Where is this?” I would bumble through various answers, none of which seemed to fit, until I settled on a good response. I recalled Bush and Folger’s theory of transformative mediation and their seventh hallmark about the importance of working in the room and keeping the attention of the conversation on the present and on the reality of the room. In recognition of this hallmark, I developed the standard response, “This is right now, right here, in this very room.”

This response began to open up the possibility of the artwork not only being a photograph, but also the very act of our sharing of a conversation moment in a real space and the possibilities and stresses of being faced with the reality of another human being. In a world that is becoming ever more cybernetically enhanced with globally mediated online communications, the mere act of looking another person in the eye with nothing but air between you has a profoundly revolutionary potential. It’s almost too much bandwidth. Information overload isn’t having 500 TV channels and five email accounts, it’s the overload of information from interacting with another
person after being in the hyper-connected digital isolation chamber constructed by laptops, TVs, billboards, cellphones, iPods and the inane ramblings of people repeating clichés to one another.

The response of “this is right now, right here, in this very room” had a kind of poetic resonance that gave room for the people present to talk about the work and us in surprisingly diverse ways. One teenager pondered the image for a long time before turning to me and saying “I get it! This photo is you.” Another visiting student heard me talk about a few of the objects in the image and then pointed at the certificate and the corridor photo and said “Ah, I see. You’re here right now, and you want to get there.”

One of the unresolved problems of the project and its definition is its relation to transformative mediation and the notion of conflicting parties. In particular, the project begins with the idea of two categories of people: Poles and Jews. I’ve discussed earlier some of the problems with this terminology, however it becomes ever more acute during one of these performative storytelling/conversation sessions. As people approach the space of the work, I immediately find myself asking “are they Jewish?” and “are they Polish?” Although this discrimination is at the very core of the work, it is easier to deal with as a concept on paper. As soon as it becomes enacted between myself and another person (whether or not the person is aware of this), it creates a deep divide. If I think the person is Jewish, I immediately recall how Nazis used gentile informants in occupied Poland to discern who was Jewish. The Poles’ long proximity to their Jewish neighbors gave them a keen sense of who was an wasn’t Jewish. I found myself developing my own kind of “Jewdar” and “Poldar.” It’s impossible for me to say how accurate my assumptions were because I never asked anyone how they identified. This was an ethos I established at the beginning of this version of B’Seder that remained consistent throughout each performance.

One discussion around the pot of cholent in the image led to me explaining the idea of shabbat and the preparations that orthodox Jews make in order to have warm food throughout the day. This gave rise to some open, unanswered questions about who is Jewish, in what ways, and about the possibility of being perceived as Jewish by others.
Right:
B'Seder, May 6/2011
Inkjet photomontage, 72" x 58"
Martin Buber famously described a philosophy of interacting with others and the world according to two modes: *I-Thou* and *I-It.* The first attitude involves being in dialog with another person with the whole of one’s being. These kinds of conversations are intimate, flowing and reciprocal, while the *I-It* mode involves a kind of separation and detachment from the other. The moment in a conversation with another person when you think about the other person as another person, they stop being a subject and become an object. They become an *It.*

I found myself oscillating between these two attitudes throughout my performance sessions at the Photographic Resource Center gallery. The aim, of course, is to move towards being within *I-Thou* interactions as much as possible, but this is a longer term goal that I will arrive at gradually though the construction and collaborative editing of this work.

The diagrams in the margin show the sequence of object/stories discussed in three separate conversations with visitors to the gallery. Each set of narratives followed a different sequence, led by the visitors’ interest and my own sense of natural topic transitions. These diagrams relate directly to the floor plan illustrations from the earlier section on memory palaces. Here you can see my process unfolding with viewers, building a stronger sense of how to order the anecdotes into a larger flowing text. This general progression from disarray to an organized linear sequence is strongly related to Pierre Janet’s ideas about the importance of narrative in post-traumatic therapy. The ability of myself and others to assemble historical fragments into a more cohesive whole is both a kind of group writing project as well as a process of reconciliation, recognition and understanding for people interested in Polish and Jewish histories.

May 6/2011

After the performances at the PRC gallery, I made a number of edits to the photomontage based on my conversations and interactions with the visitors. I added images of book I read while at the gallery, I rearranged a few of the objects within the space of the image and I added a DVD of a documentary film about Joseph Rotblat, a Polish Jewish emigré who devoted his life to stopping
nuclear proliferation. His story is a significant one in terms of bridging Polish and Jewish communities with the story of an individual of remarkable character who was the only member of the Manhattan Project to quit on moral grounds.

May 8/2011

I performed a rendition of B’Seder at Harvard’s Signet Society as part of the Gavin Kroeber and Rebecca Uchill’s Experience Economies 4 production. It was breathtakingly uninteresting for most of the audience attending the first portion of the event. I read, among other things, Julian Tuwim’s poem We Polish Jews—a poem which seemed strong and moving when I read it to myself, but was came across as loud and angry and nationalistic in a way I had trouble embodying when I spoke the words aloud in English. It starts like this:

*I am a Pole, because it pleases me. It is my personal and private matter, and I do not intend to submit a report nor an explication, an explanation to justify the basis of it. I do not divide Poles into ‘native-born’ and ‘not-native-born’; I leave that for the native-born and non-native-born racists, the local and non-local Hitlerites. I divide Poles and Jews as well all other nations, into intelligent and stupid, honest and thieves, intelligent and dullards, interesting and boring, those who have been harmed and those who harm, gentlemen and not, etc. I also divide Poles into fascists and anti-fascists. These two camps, are not, of course homogenous, each of them disperses shades of color of differing intensities. But, the line of demarcation most certainly exists and shortly will be clearly seen. Shades will remain shades but the color of that very line will be intense and deeper in a marked way.***

There is a kind of aggressive obstinacy and anger in this text that expresses itself much better in Polish. Reading this aloud to a group of random people in Boston, in English, just seems impolite, crass and worst of all: empty. Następnym razu po polsku.

The second half of the performance took place later in the evening to a smaller group of people. It was more conversationally-oriented and centered around small 8x10” prints of the B’Seder photomontage. I traversed the objects in the image and explained some of the stories in the work. This produced one important anecdote from a visitor about a Jewish experience of visiting
B’Seder, May 8/2011
Storytelling performance with borscht, latkes, inkjet photomontage and mirror box sculpture
Berlin and being inundated by young students who were fascinated by Jewish things. “We love reading Marx and Freud,” they would exclaim. It was also clear that the young Germans he met were trying desperately to find some way through the knowledge of the actions of their parents’ and grandparents’ generation, with little success.

In this part of the event, I also introduced the concept of cultural reflection. This generated some very valuable observations about my project and the work of Poles in Poland who create various simulated Jewish cultural products. For more on these topics, see the section below entitled “Mirror Box.” At one moment, a visitor asked me the question: “Do you want to go back to Poland?” I thought to myself, to my great surprise, “No. I don’t.” But for some reason I replied in the affirmative. Obligation. A sense of duty. Honor. How Polish.

May 17/2011

In this most recent event, I brought together some of the diverse components of previous performances along with several new elements. I used the costume and music from the Ubu Next along with the B’Seder photomontage image and added a two new elements: audience readings and a sculptural composition of disarray.

There is an immense body of written work that addresses various components of Polish and Jewish relations. To immerse oneself only in the knowledge of Polish and Jewish concerns during the six years of World War II would in itself be an academic undertaking of at least the same duration. One could spend a lifetime learning new ways of deepening one’s knowledge of that moment. Considering that Poles and Jews have a thousand year shared history, and the fact that I was becoming highly exhausted from staring into the abyss of Shoah history, I decided to try something new. I had, on my bookshelf, about thirty books relating to this area of study yet to be read. So I copied out a paragraph from the middle of each of the books and distributed the texts among my audience with the instructions to read them aloud, if they wished. Many did. I listened, played music on the electric ukulele, and judged the texts.
Malcolm Gladwell calls this act of making decisions from small amounts of information “thin slicing.” According to him, many experts with excellent track records can actually make better decisions when they spend less time making decisions than when they spend more time considering something. This is the whole concept behind speed dating. Performing a version of *B'Seder* this way was a fast flirtation with some of the unread concepts in my bookshelf, delivered through my audience. As an accumulation process, it helped me arrive very quickly at some decisions about what to include and what not to include in the next revision of the photomontage.

At this event, I also deliberately arranged the studio space into more of a chaotic state, while using a few of the objects to allude to a courtly world. Two armchairs were placed on top of a table, with a bench like steps leading up to them, suggesting a pair of thrones. Around the room, the objects which were there before the performance were strewn throughout. Tables were upturned, chairs put on their sides, boxes emptied, dividing walls randomly separated the space. *B'Seder* is a project about moving from disarray towards organization. This moment was a deliberate step back into a kind of chaos.

**Looking Back**

I consider each of these 12 events to be a test of the *B'Seder* project. Both the project’s content and its methodology are still in development. In the parlance of human factors science (or “interaction design” or “usability”) these events have been a kind of “user test.” User testing is a crucial practice in many industries that employ design and engineering processes. User testing can range from small-scale, informal and anecdotal efforts, to highly rigorous peer-reviewed scientific experiments within established fields such as social psychology and vision science. One might even describe user trials in the pharmaceutical industry as a kind of “user test.”

The experiments I have conducted with the *B'Seder* project are more within the realm of “hallway user testing.” This is an informal strategy of cheap, low-cost testing that involves using small numbers of participants to identify most of the major problems with a design. The term
Storytelling performance with inkjet photomontage in banner mode, bat, music, audience readings, mirror sculpture, thrones, disarrayed room
comes from the notion that using five to seven people randomly from the hallway outside your office will be sufficient to catch the majority of the main usability problems with a design. Nielsen and Landauer conducted a study in 1993 that confirmed this idea by comparing the effectiveness of random user tests with evaluations of software by trained usability experts. The assumption here, of course, is that an artistic project has something to gain by following design and engineering methodologies.

To refer back to the System Design chapter, these 12 actions have been focused on the story-accumulation phase of the process (with some attention towards each of the remaining phases of the work). The end result of this B'Seder project, relating to Polish and Jewish histories, will be a set of artefacts that can serve to reconstitute storytelling events as well as a general process for producing similar work within other cultural contexts.
RELATED WORK

There is an innumerable set of artists, writers and filmmakers who work and have worked with subjects relating to Polish and Jewish histories. Include all the artists who have produced work that is not thematically, but formally similar to B’Seder, and the list grows substantially. I have selected below a few key works that relate to B’Seder in either form or content.
Yael Bartana: *Mary Koszmary*

The recent work of Yael Bartana is probably the most directly relevant work of contemporary art to inform the *B’Seder* project. The subject of her 2007 short film *Mary Koszmary* exposes some of the motivations and subtext behind the *B’Seder* project and is an excellent lens through which to refract its intentions and emotions. In a sense, *Mary Koszmary* critiques what *B’Seder* seeks to build. In fact, Bartana’s work holds the potential to substantially affect the course of *B’Seder* — perhaps even to destroy it.

The video depicts a young man in an empty stadium giving a speech to no one. He speaks poetically about the loss of the Jewish population of Poland and calls longingly for their return, so that Poland can heal.
Jews! Fellow countrymen! People. People!

You think the old woman who still sleeps under Rifke’s quilt doesn’t want to see you? Has forgotten about you? You’re wrong. She dreams about you every night. Dreams and trembles with fear. Since the night you were gone and her mother reached for your quilt she has had bad dreams. Nightmares. Only you can chase them away. Let the three million Jews that Poland has missed stand by her bed and finally chase away the demons. Return to Poland. To your country! Stand by her bed and lay your hands on that old quilt. Thin as a sheet with the down long gone. I’m telling you — lay your hands on her and tell her, “We’re giving this quilt to you.” What do we need it for? There’s no longer any down in it. Only pain. Heal our wounds and you’ll see. And we’ll be together again.

This is a call not to the dead but to the living. We want three million Jews to return to Poland. To live with us again! We’re asking you to return!³⁹

The speech, reproduced in part above, reveals the nostalgia and the longing for the Jewish nation that many Poles feel. This intense nostalgia has been likened to the pain of a phantom limb, as described earlier in the earlier section on the Mirror Box. Bartana’s work belies this feeling, this lonely moaning that only Jews can help Poland heal its wounds. The call for Jews to return to Poland is a fantasy that impels many, but of course runs aground in the quagmire of Polish anti-Semitism. Excerpts from Mary Koszmary are available on You Tube and the videos’ comment areas are filled with angry anti-Semitic ranting like this recent note.

traitor to the nation, the son of secret police agent .. go the fuck back to Israel ..
animals are closer to me than the Jew ..³¹

These kinds of responses are part of the brutal terrain of Polish/Jewish relations and part of the reason why something needs to be done. B’Seder is in part motivated by wanting to reduce these anti-Semitisms as well, to be honest, by the nostalgia that Mary Koszmary depicts. This nostalgia and this anger are the primary propellants of the project.

Despite the impossibility of the fantasy of Jewish return to Poland, Bartana still manages to avoid cynicism and builds up some bridges between Poland and Israel.
She states that in both countries “there are a small percentage of intellectuals and a small Left. Both we and they are nations living with the trauma of the past and constantly struggling with the search for identity and definition.”

Bartana is simultaneously a critic of Polish nostalgia and a playful builder of relationships between the two countries. Her act of voicing the elephant in the room of Polish/Jewish relations through *Mary Koszmary* was a very necessary act that should be seen as a kind of service to the Polish state. It seems that the Polish cultural establishment agrees, as Bartana was selected to be the official Polish representative at the 2011 Venice Biennial despite not even being a Polish citizen (she is Israeli). The club of artists who have represented nations of which they are not a citizen is a small one, but it does exist. The British artist Liam Gillick, for example, represented Germany in 2009. The condition of 21st century travel, economics and identity is producing a growing number of people with hybrid states of being. I myself am Polish in the morning, Jewish at lunchtime, Canadian in the afternoon and American in the evening.

There is also much to be said about *Mary Koszmary*’s successor works, *Mur i weżła* and *Zamach*. Much like *Koszmary* appropriates the style of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, its sequels operate within the rhetorical space of Zionist propaganda films. Bartana plays a game with the transplanting of kibbutz settler ideology within the Polish nostalgic dream of Jewish return. Accompanying these three film works, Bartana has created a semi-fictional organization called the Jewish Renaissance Movement. Its manifesto, written from a subject position that is ambiguously both/neither Polish and/nor Jewish, reads as follows:

*We want to return! Not to Uganda, not to Argentina or to Madagascar, not even to Palestine. It is Poland that we long for, the land of our fathers and forefathers. In real-life and in our dreams we continue to have Poland on our minds.*

*We want to see the squares in Warsaw, Łódź and Kraków filled with new settlements. Next to the cemeteries we will build schools and clinics. We will plant trees and build new roads and bridges.*
We wish to heal our mutual trauma once and for all. We believe that we are fated to live here, to raise families here, die and bury the remains of our dead here.

We are revivifying the early Zionist phantasmagoria. We reach back to the past — to the world of migration, political and geographical displacement, to the disintegration of reality as we knew it — in order to shape a new future.

This is the response we propose for these times of crisis, when faith has been exhausted and old utopias have failed. Optimism is dying out. The promised paradise has been privatized. The Kibbutz apples and watermelons are no longer as ripe.

We welcome new settlers whose presence shall be the embodiment of our desire for another history. We shall face many potential futures as we leave behind our safe, familiar, and one-dimensional world.

We direct our appeal not only to Jews. We accept into our ranks all those for whom there is no place in their homelands — the expelled and the persecuted. There will be no discrimination in our movement. We shall not ask about your life stories, check your residence cards or question your refugee status. We shall be strong in our weakness.

Our Polish brothers and sisters! We plan no invasion. Rather we shall arrive like a procession of the ghosts of your old neighbours, the ones haunting you in your dreams, the neighbours you have never had a chance to meet. And we shall speak out about all the evil things that have happened between us.

We long to write new pages into a history that never quite took the course we wanted. We count on being able to govern our cities, work the land, and bring up our children in peace and together with you. Welcome us with open arms, as we will welcome you!

With one religion, we cannot listen.

With one color, we cannot see.

With one culture, we cannot feel.

Without you we can’t even remember.
Join us, and Europe will be stunned! 94

This is truly a utopian vision for a multicultural Poland that is sadly far too ironic to ever be achievable, and yet it is a worthwhile text to embed within the B’Seder project and worth repeating, performing and transforming. The discussion, outrage, arguments, compliances and wonder produced by this work are the real material of Bartana's craft.

Guy de Cointet

This French American artist is known for his work in producing encoded paintings and objects that are used as cues for the scripts of theatrical productions. Typically a performer will stand on
stage and recite a story, using components of paintings and sculptures made by the artist to cue portions of the story. By pointing, the performer indicates what component is connected to the story. Sometimes letters will key the name of an anecdotal component, and other times the key is more obscure.

Artur Żmijewski: Them

This work by Żmijewski is a documentary video of a group of people representing four political factions of Polish society who are asked to collaborate on a painting. This video depicts what might take place in B'Seder if the role of the primary storyteller/editor were to be removed and the audience were encouraged to self-organize (it doesn't end well for the painting).
Krzysztof Wodiczko: Alien Staff

Krzysztof Wodiczko’s work Alien Staff is a storytelling object design for immigrants to mediate their experiences within an often xenophobic society. The objects carry stories and produce a more overt transitional space for the immigrant who is always in a state of transition. The staffs carry stories literally in video form and by association through the human carrier’s stories (and by projection through the conversants’ stories). The object gives the carrier a place of importance in public space, and, like a Native American talking stick, helps “give them the floor” to speak when
the act of speaking is such an emotionally charged hurdle for so many new citizens. The video embedded in the stick acts as a focus of interest between strangers and a prompt to specific stories of the specific individual’s immigrant experience.

*B’Seder* takes a few aspects of from the Alien Staff project, such as the importance of mobility and the use of a mediating object to help prompt storytelling. As with Wodiczko’s project, *B’Seder* is less about the image/object than it is about the narratives and interpersonal relations it produces.

**Ian Wojtowicz: Oak**

In some ways, this project was the genesis of *B’Seder*. It was the first project where I worked with the form of sculpture and storytelling, the aesthetic of disarray, as well as a long time frame, and a slow methodical process of working. The following is a description of the project that I wrote not longer after its completion.

*As strange as this may sound, this work began with an intuitive desire to hold the weight of a human head in my hands. I knew exactly the shape, size and weight that I wanted to achieve. Tactility was crucial. After considering different materials, I settled on wood. From there, the project evolved very fluidly through a variety of different forms and subjects, meandering away from my initial goal into unexpected territory. The richness of these tangents and the value of letting go of my ideal was immense.*

*After thinking about this project for several months, I found the piece of wood I needed. I was visiting my grandmother at the time and thinking about her life story, about Poland’s history, about conflict and purpose in life, about my childhood memories, and about old friendships. I had taken the bus across Canada from Van-
couver to see her. The three day trip gave the moment of arrival an epic quality. My grandmother had risked her life in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 and is considered by many to be a hero of the war. I've never risked my life for anything, so when I use the word “epic” to describe my bus journey, it has a completely different meaning than if she were to utter it.

I told my grandmother that I wanted to carve some wood and she suggested that I visit her neighbor, Walter. I had known Walter as a distant character from my childhood. He was a huge man. He was a cook and had a belly the size of a bathtub. He would visit my grandparents every once in a while and I always remember his big personality and generous spirit warmly. But on this day when I went to visit Walter, my mind was meandering through what I was learning about World War II history. I began to wonder about the dynamics of Polish-German relations. I wondered how such a situation could have evolved. How could such atrocities have occurred? Anger and animosity must still linger between people like the way one’s hearing goes numb after a loud noise. And yet this neighborly friendship between my grandparents and Walter, the German from next door, had been a part of my life as long as I can remember.

Walter greeted me with cheerful caution. When I explained that I was looking for some wood to carve, he said “as long as it isn’t going to be a portrait of the Pope.” I assured him that it wouldn’t be and he helped me find two stumps from his woodpile: one oak, one maple.

On Walter’s farm there were a few old barns that were rotten and collapsing. He described in length how he didn’t want to tear them down, even though they were no longer safe. He wanted the barns to decay slowly. This is an aesthetic that Walter and my father share.

I thanked him, left and took the two stumps back across Canada by Greyhound. They were lost in Thunder Bay, the town where Terry Fox died on his marathon across the country. They were eventually recovered and shipped to Vancouver.

A few months later I flew the oak stump through Dallas to Paris where I would be spending the next four months as a student at ENSBA. Along the way is was adorned with an official Department of Homeland Security sticker. I carved it over the course of four months, and flew it back to Vancouver. The puzzled looks of baggage handlers and customs agents gave me tremendous joy.
The formation of Oak in Paris is documented below. Travel and the changes made to the form of the wood along the way feature significantly in my meaning of this work. Environmental conditions greatly affected the forms that the stump evolved through. This work is a kind of travelog. In that sense, the video documentation of the work's changing form is just as important as the final state of the wood itself.

Oak did not end up being the smooth round form I had initially envisioned, but something new, something beyond my own imagination, something impossible to have designed from the start.
CONCLUSION

As to the action which is about to begin, it takes place in Poland — that is to say: nowhere. ⁹⁸

Despite the long evolution of this project, B’Seder is still in a nascent state. And this is as it
should be. Of the four phases of the project described in the System Design chapter, the work is
still operating within the first two: accumulation and editing. However, after the twelve user tests,
it is possible to begin to draw together some reflections on the process so far.

Collaboration

One of the most notable shortcomings of the B’Seder project is the lack of substantial collabora-
tion in the design of the project. I am the sole author of the process, despite involving others in
the user tests. Perhaps the most significant shortcoming so far of this project is that the test audi-
ences I used were largely from outside both the Polish and Jewish communities. Although an this
was an intentional decision, it now seems like the project is ready to operate more boldly within
both communities.
A Sculptural Space
The work has also been hampered by a slow editing process. Given the size of the image files (2GB), modifications have not been very rapid. It may be worth considering some new architecture for the accumulation and editing of the mnemonic objects. The use of a permanent space with actual physical objects could take the place of image editing software and allow the work to be more sculptural, physically editable and collaborative. High definition video recording could help track the evolution of the composition, while projections within this sculptural space could be used to bridge other places around the world. The challenge, as always with digital media, is in maintaining the here and now principle of transformative mediation.

More Density
Really build density to produce a clutter than then necessitates some substantial editing. If this photomontage is a text, and as Michel de Certeau wrote, reading is like wandering through a city, then this town is a swamp. Should it be pushed past the point of La Commune with a Haussman-esque restructuring? If the work does not arrive to a state at which others want to overthrow it and reformat it in some way, it will have failed. It needs to become an actual site of the contested territory in question. In other words: bring the heat.

On the armbands worn in the ghettos, the Star of David was painted. I believe in a future Poland, in which that star, the one from the armband, will be one of the highest decorations awarded to the most gallant Polish soldiers and officers. They will wear it proudly on their breasts, next to the Virtuti Militari. There will also be a Cross of the Ghetto - a deeply symbolic title.
The Mirror Box

Although this object doesn’t appear in the current version of the B’Seder image, it is a concept that has become a part of the project and will likely appear in a future version. The Jewish experience of contemporary Poland can be disconcerting, faced with the new interest in all things Jewish among the younger generation. The current pangs for new Jewish communities in Poland has been likened to the pain of a phantom limb. Yael Bartana’s “Jewish Renaissance Movement” attends to this cultural force by suggesting a limb transplant, when perhaps what needs to be done it to simply cure the pain.

In 1998, the UCSD neuroscientist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran developed a remarkably inexpensive and effective way of curing the phantom limb pain felt by amputees. It consists of using a well placed mirror to fool the mind into seeing the missing limb, and then exercising it by moving the reflected limb. The illusion has proven to instantaneously reduce the pain felt in missing limbs.

Of course, the longing for a Jewish community in Poland is only by metaphor a phantom limb pain, however there may be some reason to believe that scaling this experiment up to a social level may have therapeutic effects. In a sense, this is already happening in Poland with Jewish restaurants that don’t serve kosher food, and all-Polish klezmer bands.

The metaphor of the phantom limb and the analogy of the mirror box may be a fruitful line of inquiry for a future version of B’Seder.

A Memory Palace in Public Space

Once the B’Seder photomontage matures, and the process moves from phase 1 & 2 to 3, a sequential path through the narratives of the photomontage will have been developed. For example, the set of narratives may be selected in the following order:
and then arranged into a memory palace like so:
Once the structure of the memory palace is learned, it could be remapped onto various new terrains, with new loci. In this example, the remapping takes the original building-scale memory palace and maps it onto a larger terrain of several city blocks. One could imagine using this techniques to move from the dense B'Seder image (an unarranged memory palace) to a classical memory palace (the previous image) to a new memory palace through which one could actually walk on a regular basis with other people.

The following image shows the path of the March of the Living from Auschwitz, through the town of Oświęcim, to Birkenau, with narrative loci marked along the way. Considering the crucial importance of this site to Polish/Jewish relations, the B'Seder project must truly be well developed, well considered and well vetted before it could be enacted in this space.
Other Scenarios

Finally, if this method is proven to be helpful and productive within the context of Polish/Jewish communities it could be reapplied to other situations of cultural conflict where collective memories are contested, such as between North Americans and their Aboriginal populations, between Irish Protestants and Catholics, or between Serbs, Muslims and Croats in the former Yugoslavia.

Quant à l’action qui est en train de commencer, elle se passe en Pologne — c’est-à-dire: partout.\textsuperscript{101}
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A frightening prospect, perhaps, and certainly not the words of Alfred Jarry, however the context of Poland may provide valuable lessons that can be reapplied to improving the conditions of other cultural conflicts.
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