Scene/Unseen
A Public Art Exhibition researched and curated
by Julin Everett and Cari Freno

Overview

During the Nazi Occupation of the Second World War, European governments forced Jewish citizens to wear identifying badges—meant to isolate them and publicly mark them as inferior. However, some chose to embrace their forced visibility and celebrate their Jewish identity by posing for professional portraits while wearing the yellow star. A collection of these portraits, obtained from various national and international archives, will be on display across campus during the Fall 2017 semester.

The subtle, yet fierce pride shown by the figures in these portraits models and inspires resistance in the face of oppression. These photographs, which invite layered readings, were personal artefacts sometimes sent to loved ones. While the courage to embrace a public mark of shame and transform it into a symbol of pride within the portraitist’s studio may seem like a trivial act, Scene/Unseen exposes and celebrates these displays of personal agency.

This guide is comprised of four sections, in question form, which will facilitate discussion around the main themes of the exhibition, connections to the Ursinus mission and core, and to the college’s CIE courses.

The yellow star has precedence in other insignia imposed on Jews since medieval times. The symbol is a corruption of the Magen David or the shield of David, commonly employed in the mid-nineteenth and early 20th century by Zionist communities. Imposed between the years of 1939 and 1945 in the following countries: Germany, France, Poland, Germany, Belgium, Holland, the Soviet Union, Croatia, Hungary, The Slovak Republic, Bulgaria and Romania, it was one of many insignias used in countries under Nazi rule (the pink triangle, the black triangle, etc.)

OBSERVE

How does the studio portrait compare to the ID photo or to the snapshot or even to the selfie?

What is the relationship between the subject and the camera in these contexts?

What do you think about the mise-en-scène of the portraits: backdrops, props, poses?
How do the portraits compare to other visual media or signage that exist on the campus?

Does the scale and placement of the portrait affect a viewer’s experience? If so, how?

**CONSIDER**

**Agency under the body under attack**

- Why do you think many of the subjects of these portraits went to have their photo taken within days of receiving their yellow star?
- Many Nazi-occupied countries forbade Jews to: frequent non-Jewish businesses; own a radio, own a bicycle; own a pet; visit public parks. How might these portraits be a reaction to these restrictions?
- Although Jews were made to wear the yellow star while in public or on the streets, they would have been able to remove them once inside the photographer’s studio. In fact, many did remove their yellow stars. Why might some have chosen to remain “visible”?

**Self-made Artefacts of the Self**

- How do we use photography as a medium for recording personal history?
- Can photography be described as a democratic medium?
- Representations of the Holocaust often focus on the tragic death of approximately 6 million Jews. How do these portraits differ?
- Some of the subjects featured in Scene/Unseen were interned and deported within days or weeks of having their portrait taken. Does knowing this influence the way in which you view these images?

**Becoming Visible**

- What is a visible identity as opposed to an invisible identity?
- What are the privileges and challenges of being invisible?
- How might one’s identity change with a transformation from visible to invisible or visa-versa?
- If you could choose, would you choose to blend in or stand out?

**CONNECT**

**Ursinus Mission**

- How do the portraits on display allow us to develop a sense of human history?
- Imagine that the individuals in the portraits are your neighbors. How can their experience of becoming visible help you to understand who you are?
- Comment on the ambiguities in the identities of the people in the portraits. Can you find similar ambiguities in your own identity?
Core Curriculum

What should matter to me?
• How are we affected by the experiences of our marginalized neighbors?
• Are ethnic, religious and racial labels important? Why or Why not?

How should we live together?
• Is there a “we”? Can you imagine yourself in the place of the wearers of the yellow star?
• How can these portraits help us to consider the experiences of the visible and invisible minorities we encounter each day?
• How can we work towards preventing the marginalization of our fellow citizens?

How can we understand the world?
• How was your understanding of the wearers of the yellow star affected by the portraits?
• What was the effect of the placement of the portraits on campus?
• Many of the subjects in these portraits would have been young adults at the time their portrait was taken. Does this affect the way in which you view their portraits?
• A portrait represents only a second of the subject’s life. What unseen moments can you imagine when viewing these portraits?

What will I do?
• Will you find out more about the European Jewish experience?
• Will you find out more about the North American Jewish experience?
• Will you consider the experiences of other visible and invisible minorities, perhaps including yourself?
• Will you ask questions about experiences which seem to differ from your own?
• Will you actively work to stop hate speech of any kind against all other global citizens, whether they are perceived as powerful or powerless?

COMMON INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCE

How should we live our lives?
What does it mean to be human?
What is the universe and how do we fit into it?

CIE 100 Connections

• Several of the texts we have read—Job, the Ghita, Plato’s Cave and Descartes’ Method—privilege seeing as a part of one’s experience. How can we compare the way in which the visual is crucial in Scene/Unseen to its role in these texts?
• Some of our texts rely on the unseen, on knowledge based on faith. What are some of those texts and how does their use of the unseen compare to that of the portraits in Scene/Unseen?

Persepolis- Marjane Satrapi
• With the imposition of the veil in Iran, how is Marjane’s visibility affected?
• Living in Austria, Marjane tries to pass for French but is “outed” by an acquaintance. What are the benefits and drawbacks of invisibility?
• Before leaving the airport to journey to Paris, she removes her veil (France has banned “ostentations religious symbols” in public spaces). After viewing Scene/Unseen can you imagine why the French reject these physical distinctions within the public sphere?

**Between the World and Me - Ta-Nehisi Coates**
- How does the experience of wearing the yellow star compare to that of being a visible racial minority?
- Coates writes about the galaxy which separates the Black American world from the rest of the U.S. How can we imagine the experience of Jewish populations in 19th and early 20th-century Europe?
- Many of the portraits in the installation were taken to send to loved ones. Similarly, Coates writes his essay for his young son. Compare the two modes of communication.

**Job**
- Compare the reaction to hardship in the subjects of these portraits to that of Job and his friends.

**“Of Cannibals”- Michel de Montaigne**
- Despite the fact that all humans are linked genetically, we continue to label those who are culturally different as less than human. How is this accomplished under Nazi Occupation? How do these portraits push back against this label?

**Selections on Non-Violence- Mahatma Ghandi**
- How can we think about these portraits through the notions of power and honor expressed in Ghandi’s “The Essence of Nonviolence”?

**CIE 200 Connections**

**Fun Home - Alison Bechdal**
- Why was it important for Alison to make visible her “invisible” identity as a lesbian?
- What is the difference between Alison’s process of becoming visible and that of the people in the portraits?
- Would you say that in contemporary culture people have the agency to develop their identity or become “visible” on their own terms? Why or why not?
- What are symbols that you wear that signify an aspect of your identity that might otherwise be invisible?

**The Declaration of Independence- Thomas Jefferson**
- How does Jefferson’s notion of all men being created equal and inalienable rights relate to the figure’s choice to wear the star in a formal portrait?
- Is seeking freedom of expression within the confines of oppression a fundamental part of being human?

**A Communist Manifesto- Karl Marx**
- Marx discusses the concept of alienation due to the use of industrial production lines. Did alienation play a role in the effectiveness of the propaganda that the Nazis and collaborating forces used against Jewish people? Why or why not?
- The Nazi party in Germany and Nazi sympathizers in other European countries connected economic disparity to racial and cultural tension. Why was this an effective manner of social control? Is economic disparity still linked to racial and cultural tension today? Why or why not?
What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?-Fredrick Douglass

- Draw comparisons between the oppression Douglass spoke out against and the oppression facing the figures in the portraits. What types of oppression exist in contemporary culture?
- Douglass refers to the violence inflicted on black bodies in slave tradition of the U.S. How do the portraits in Scene/Unseen help us to think about the body as a site of violence?
- Douglass seems to hold all Americans responsible for the institution of slavery. Imagine yourself as a non-Jewish citizen of a Nazi-occupied country, seeing your neighbors wearing the yellow star. Is it fair to say you are in part responsible?

Civilization and it’s Discontents- Sigmund Freud

- Freud writes about the manner in which civilizations use laws to keep primitive desires such as violence in check. But he adds that civilization reserves the right to use violence against “criminals.” The images in Scene/Unseen follow laws enacted by Nazis and collaborating forces. Can you imagine how these groups might use such a theory to justify the forced wearing of the yellow star? Discuss the use of state violence in the imposition of the yellow star.
- Freud discusses why repression is necessary in order for civilization to exist. How does repression affect identity? What are the challenges that repression might present to developing identity?