

Eight Artists Find Inspiration in History

At ICP, an Exhibit Builds on the Joint's Images of War and Rescue

By JEREMY EICHLER
In its heyday, the rescue and resettlement efforts of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee were so well known that the mere mention of its name could rouse Jewish refugees from their despair. When Theodore Feder performed his first rescue operation at a bunker near Munich in the spring of 1945, he pronounced the two mysterious words assigned to him: "Joint, *Amcha*." "As if the words were a magnet and the people were iron, 20 or so bodies came out to the truck without saying a word," Mr. Feder recalls.

Mr. Feder went on to devote his life to working for the Joint, which has, since its founding in 1914, helped Jewish communities around the world that are in danger or distress. A record of its 85 years of humanitarian work has been preserved in an archive of 70,000 photographs and myriad documents.

The archive is the artistic springboard for an innovative exhibit that opens today at New York's International Center for Photography Midtown. "To The Rescue: Eight Artists in an Archive" features eight separate installations created by artists commissioned to use the Joint's archive as their inspiration. The works, which range from video installations by Pepón Osorio and Wendy Ewald to sculptures by Magdalena Abakanowicz to abstract paintings by Terry Winters, are interspersed with mounted photographs from the archive itself. Taken as a whole, "To the Rescue" not only offers a distinctive view of an organization that has avoided the public spotlight to protect its sensitive operations abroad, but it also serves as a series of experiments that examine the complicated rela-

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tionship between archival documents and aesthetics while testing the ability of art to represent history and memory.

"We're taking the raw material of the archive and transforming it into nuanced and distilled experience," explains filmmaker and media artist Alan Berliner. "These photos might be anonymous, but they're filled with history and with stories." Mr. Berliner's own installation, titled



ALAN BERLINER

PIECES OF THE PAST: A detail of Alan Berliner's 'Gathering Stones,' from 'To the Rescue: Eight Artists in an Archive' at ICP.

"Gathering Stones," is designed to resemble a photo album. Black pebbles on the floor of the gallery form the background of the album pages and larger white stones become screens onto which photographs from the archive are projected. The work stems from Mr. Berliner's conception of the archive as a collective family album, and it evokes the Jewish mourning ritual of placing stones on the tombstones of the departed.

While Mr. Berliner's project is a fairly straightforward presentation of images from the Joint's archive, installation artist Fred Wilson has taken a more oblique approach. Mr. Wilson told the Forward that his contribution to the exhibit grew out of the frustration he experi-

enced when first exposed to the vastness and gravity of the archive's contents.

"The archive is not knowable," says Mr. Wilson. "We're left only with partial views, and there's a constant nagging frustration that you're not getting at the core of what it is about." To represent his experience of first looking through the pictures, Mr. Wilson chose to reproduce individual photographs while matting

out all but a small, sometimes peripheral section of the image. The viewer is left to guess or wonder how the image as a whole appears. This masking of images, he says, serves as an allegory for the ultimate elusiveness of true knowledge and as a general exploration of the enigmatic workings of memory, in which small, sometimes tangential visual cues can conjure larger stories from a distant past.

Mr. Wilson's selective framing of photographs is perhaps also an appropriate metaphor for the exhibit as a whole that, at its best, can capture only a small portion of the Joint's

expansive history. The organization was founded in 1914 as a response to a request by then-Ambassador to Turkey Henry Morgenthau Sr. to send \$50,000 to the languishing Jewish community in Palestine. The new organization would channel "joint" funds originally raised by three groups: the Orthodox Central Committee for the Relief of Jews, the American Jewish Relief Committee and the People's Relief Committee. Through the course of its history, the Joint has worked with embattled Jewish communities in the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Yemen and elsewhere. In the past 15 years, it has broadened its mission to include nonsectarian

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relief operations in places such as Bosnia, Zimbabwe and Rwanda. The Joint's rescue and relief work in Europe during and after the Holocaust remains the organization's most heroic hour, however, and it forms the bulk of the material used in the ICP exhibit.

The idea for the show grew out of the organization's desire to communicate its history to an audience increasingly unaware of its past. Marshall Weinberg, a JDC board member, and the exhibit's curators, Marvin Heiferman and Car-

ole Kismaric, sought venues for the show that are not specifically identified as Jewish in order to reach a larger audience that would include unaffiliated Jews and non-Jews. (After the International Center for Photography, the exhibit will travel to art museums in Miami and Houston.)

"The face of American Jewry has changed," explains Mr. Weinberg. "Now huge numbers of people have never known anyone who was born overseas or who suffered in the Holocaust or who understood poverty."