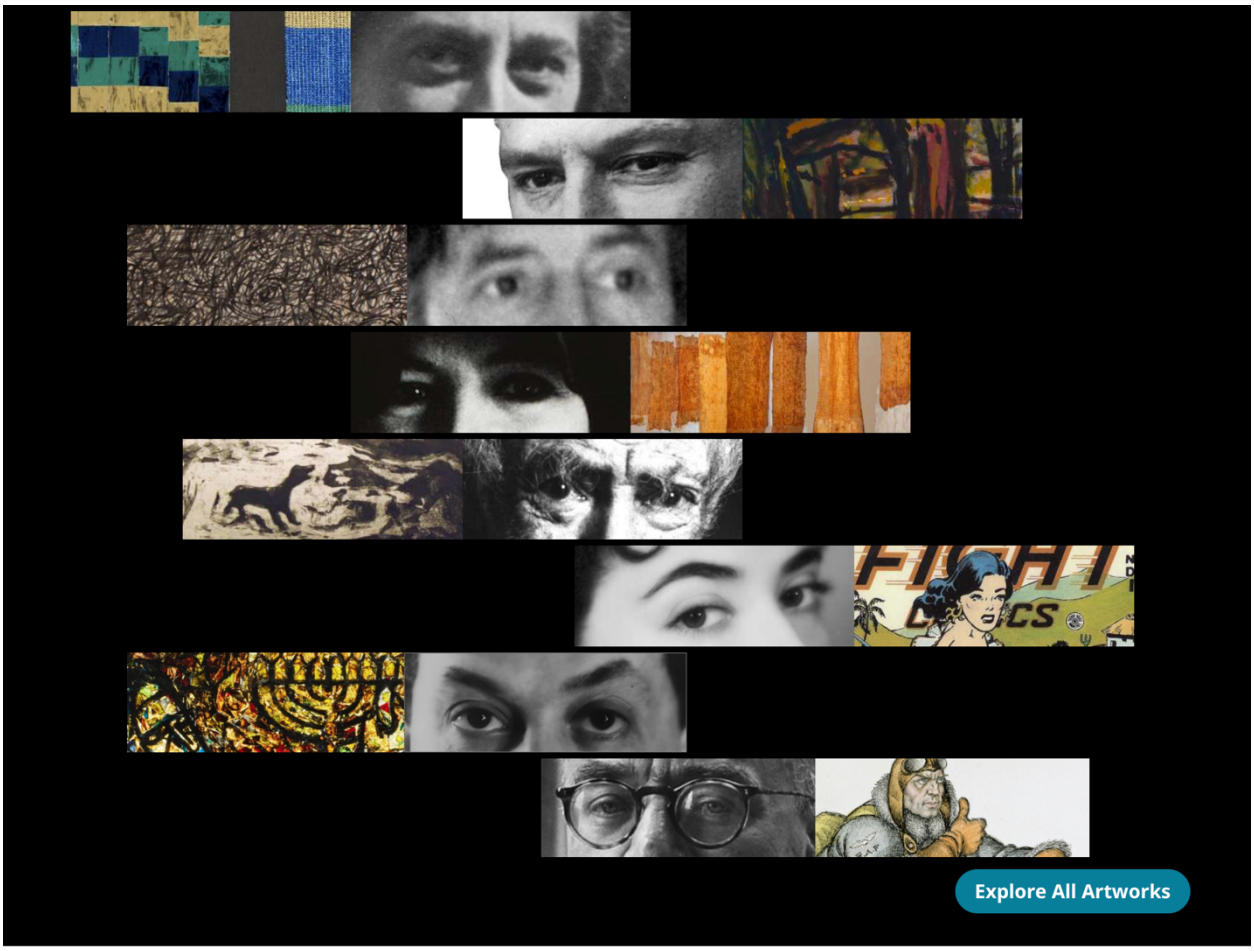

Concluding Notes

Ori Z Soltes

The last words of the last essay in this volume—on Eva Hesse—were “how much more she might have achieved had her life not been cut short at age thirty-four.” One might adapt those words and then apply them to all eight of the artists included in this diversely-written text: not how much more, necessarily, but how otherwise or different might their work have been had not the Holocaust intervened and engendered such earth-shaking changes in each of their lives.

The earthquake affected each of them differently, in part depending upon their ages and in part on their professional and socio-economic circumstances when the ground began to tremble, in

part, perhaps, by the degree to which each identified specifically as Jewish or specifically as German, or as a man or a woman, or as shy or bold—in part, simply because each of these very individual artists was so emphatically an individual. The contexts of both their forced departures from home (in Ascher's case, by quasi-paradox, departing while remaining in Germany but in hiding and under significantly uncomfortable conditions) and the manner in which they were received in the United States, was different for each—but every one of them (including Ascher) had to radically re-adjust their sense of self and the art that reflected it.

At one extreme, Anni Albers seemed barely to miss a beat in the directions in which she was moving and perhaps found more possibilities in this new world with an artistic community part of which was seeking to emulate the very sort of community she not only had to leave, but which the Nazis altogether shut down. At the other, Fritz Ascher had to altogether leave his beloved medium, painting, behind, and turned instead to poetry—and when he came out on the other side of the war, to return to painting, his style had intensified, and his subject matter nearly completely changed.

Would Eva Hesse have emerged as the meteor she was had her family not had to flee, sending her ahead, as it were, at such a young age, had she not grown up in an intensely double-language, double-culture, double-identity community—or had she not sustained so many other losses so early, or had she not spent that stretch of time in Germany, seeking her artistic self as her married self was fragmenting, *after* the war? What if Rudy Lesser not only had to leave Germany when he did, but had not found it necessary to spend all that time in Scandinavia before coming to the United States, also *after* the war?

What, too, of Samson Schames? It was less his post-war arrival into the United States arriving at its own artistic hegemony through abstract expressionism, after having rebuilt himself as an innovative artist in England after at first being marginalized as an enemy alien—than that he was already being cut off from the outstanding career he was poised to carved out in the Germany whose Nazification was labeling his work degenerate and removing it from public viewing even before he fled the country. How otherwise might his career have evolved—and how other than a founding parent of "detritus art" would he have continued to develop?

Aside from those intensely dark drawings, would Dzubas have arrived at such an extraordinary lush and—literally—larger than life visual vocabulary had he not ended up in the land of emerging abstract expressionism just in time to catch its headwinds? What vocabulary would Lily Renee have found back in the Old Country? Surely not the transformative female heroic comic book persona that served as a stand-in for her sense of being less than heroic (who was, in fact, heroic on so many levels, from the complex layers of her journey to America to walking into the male domain of the comic-book world and proving herself not just a temporary stand-in but a force in her own right.

What of Artur Szyk, a crusader with a pen whom Eleanor Roosevelt adulated as a one-man anti-Fascist army—but who, in spite of an already impressive career behind him, had to come to the United States by way of England and Canada to get *in*?

Aside from Szyk, interestingly, and to a large extent, Schames, none of these artists placed Jewishness at the center of their sense of self. In Alber's case, she barely seems to notice that the synagogue commissions late in her career come from *synagogues*—or that her abandoned Judaism is what pushed her out of Germany, except to the extent of barely acknowledging that it was her Judaism that forced her husband out of Germany. The specifically Jewish component of each of these seven artists provokes questions that are part of the larger range of identity and art-production questions to which all artists, and all human beings, are subject. And while the specific historical context of their forced migrations was the extraordinary conditions created by the Holocaust, before and since that era there have been scores of artists who have been part of forced-migration patterns of thousands—indeed, millions—of individuals seeking America alone as a new home in which to reshape their lives with all of the complicated aspects of such reshaping.

The specific manner in which America initially received these individuals and so many others as immigrants particularly in the era defined by the Nazi-induced Conflagration that was consuming their world also raises questions about the identity of the land of the free, politically, socially, culturally—spiritually. These questions persist not only until the present time but have reached a new intensity in the current era. As so often, the question of "Jewish" art, identity, migratory transformation, and spiritual, cultural, and social reconfiguration is thus embedded in other

definitional questions that, as Americans, and more than that, as human beings, we are compelled to continue to pose—without ever becoming too certain that we know the answers.

* * * * *

The essays in the volume for which these paragraphs constitute concluding notes are themselves a migratory series: Beginning with a broad introduction to the concept of identity—how it is affected by moving from one country, culture, language, and their concomitants—that introduction turned to more specific effects of this process on artists and on the art that they create. That same essay migrated toward the story of Jewish immigrants to the United States, and to the very different ways in which such newcomers established themselves as Americans, from sports to music and visual art, before the essay turned toward a preview of the essays that followed.

Those essays, in turn, offered further migration: from a broad psychological discussion of immigrant and identity issues to one tightly focused on US immigration policies around the time of World War II and the Holocaust. Finally, a complex passage through the diverse territories of eight different artists whose common denominator was how their lives and their art were affected by the ugly contours of the Nazi period. For the seven artists who arrived at some point to these shores as immigrants and refugees, both their psychological and emotional evolutions and their professional and artistic paths migrated through a remarkable range of conditions and outcomes, as these essays demonstrate—nor was the one artist whose migration was into hiding within Germany any less seriously affected by the conditions endemic to that era, as we have seen.

Within the interdisciplinary—psychological, theological, historical, political, and aesthetic—variations on several themes, the most salient for these artists is what they represent of the human experience and the human state of being-in-the-world. We are migratory as a species virtually as far back as we can trace ourselves. From the time when hominids like Lucy ambled through the Awash Valley in what is today Ethiopia, we have been on the move. Over the course of 3.2 million years, we journeyed through other parts of Africa, ultimately migrating north, up into the Middle East and beyond it, to Europe and Asia. Considerably later in our wandering, as

we noted in the introduction, the migratory process led humans to North and then Central and South America—all the way to its southernmost tip, later called Tierra del Fuego (Land of Fire).

During that long process, migrating humans carried within them the eventual development of increasingly complex verbal language and, further, the shaping of new three-dimensional visual forms in stone and pigments on walls of caves that we understand to be the first sculptures and paintings made by humans. So, too, those myriad generations evolved from *language* to an ever-expanding array of *languages* that themselves evolved as the migratory process continued: one group—the so-called Indo-Europeans, established in the area of the Caucasus Mountains—spread their migratory tendrils from beyond the British Isles to China, with branches of their aboriginal language shaped into diverse forms, from Old Norse and Welsh to Tocharian A and B. One Italic branch of Indo-European eventuated as Latin, and with the dissolution of the Roman Empire less than fifteen centuries ago, that dialect yielded its own dialects: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Gallego, Catalan, Provencal, Italian, Romanche, and others.

In each instance in which a language engendered diverse progeny—and as not only visual art, but music and dance continued to shape human expression—human *identity* developed along often particularized personality lines: every rendition of human cultural being-in-the-world shared common human features and yet no two were precisely alike. Among the human groups recognizable by an existence that is particularly migratory are the Jews. As a branch of the Hebrew-Israelite-Judaean tradition that carried from the time of Abraham to that of Moses, and from Ezra to Hillel and Jesus, the Jews emerged from the second century as an archipelago of islands within extensive seas of paganism and then of Christian and Islam on the one hand, and Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism on the other.

Again and again across the past eighteen centuries of Jewish history, dispersions from within the diaspora have effected a continual migration of Jewish populations, on smaller and larger scales: exile from Judaea-Palestine itself in 135 CE at the behest of the Roman Emperor Hadrian; massacres in and expulsions from the Rhineland in 1096, during the First Crusade, (the process repeating itself half a century later during the Second Crusade); expulsions from England in 1290 and France in 1306, and, most famously, from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1496. The descendants of Jews who settled in the then-vast kingdom of Poland in 1343 at the invitation of

King Casimir the Great would be massacred and expelled in the struggle for Ukrainian independence from Poland in 1648-1666.

In the murderous context of the Holocaust, an unprecedented level of urgency was attached to the need to migrate from Germany and then from other parts of Europe. As the British all but shut the door to legal immigration to Palestine and as the United States refused to budge even a few inches from the immigration-quota position to which it had arrived with the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, the outcome for would-be Jewish migration to ports of safety closed in a death-wielding choke hold.

On the one hand, what affected Jews in general yielded what we have been able to parse as a particular range of effects on Jewish artists. On the other, now, some eighty years after the Holocaust and its accompanying horrors are past, the United States and the world at large are confronted with vast numbers of migrants—few of them Jews—seeking new homes in which to forge new identities. The irony is that the current presidential regime here in this country has come very quickly to resemble the regime that overwhelmed Germany beginning in 1933 and led to such a profound need for so many fleeing Germany to seek refuge in America.

The question is whether we can learn from the layered past or simply repeat the errors, with their tragic consequences, that we have committed before. So many traditions adulate the principle of *welcoming the stranger*. Are we capable of acting on the principle enshrined in that phrase that is claimed as essential to our cultural and religious heritages—both within and beyond the boundaries of the Abrahamic world? And if not, where will the story—the multiple stories—of Identity, Art, and Migration carry us as a people (whoever the particular “us” happens to be) and as a species?