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Sensing the Holocaust Affect: Memorials in Repeat, Revision and Return

Figure 1.1 Jane Korman, ‘I Will Survive’, Dancing Auschwitz (2010)
Source: Photo copyright Jane Korman.

Dancing on graves

In January 2010, a curious form of Holocaust art appeared on YouTube. It featured the father of artist Jane Korman, Holocaust
survivor Adolek Kohn, dancing to Gloria Gaynor's 1978 disco anthem *I Will Survive* with five of his grandchildren across memorial sites in Central and Eastern Europe. Korman's family covered Auschwitz Death Camp, The Absent Synagogue, Radagast Train Station and Lodz Ghetto in Poland; the Terezin Ghetto Fortress, Theresienstadt Concentration Camp and The Maisel Synagogue in the Czech Republic; and Dachau Concentration Camp in Germany. Their dancing was simple and jovial, their choreographics reminiscent of the kind of dancing that happens at family functions, recalling easy moves, such as a shoulder shimmy or a step-to-the-side. Their attitudes were neither attention seeking nor self-conscious, but rather seemed to rely on familiar practices of family photography. There is no sense, at least in watching the clip, that its performers had intended for it to become an online sensation, earning over 700,000 hits in under two weeks, or that in the ensuing days, the global media would alternately charge it with claims of disrespect or applaud it for its life-affirming vision.

In October, *Dancing Auschwitz* won the People's Choice award for the Best European Short Film at the 2010 DokumentART Film Festival in Neubrandenberg, Germany.

In this chapter I examine *Dancing Auschwitz* to consider how iconic memorials situated across Germany's touristscape create opportunities for sensorial and sentimental engagements with the past. In particular, I chart the memory affect in its guise as a Holocaust affect – and I build on Vivian M. Patraka’s notion of the ‘Holocaust performative’ to emphasise how histories of the Holocaust are mediated through contexts which enable bodies to feel the pasts of others. Patraka’s study of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum focusses on how the idea of the Holocaust is constructed through gestural interactions with material history. This is cast through the replacement by museum visitors of the Holocaust deceased, where ‘[i]n a museum of the dead, the critical actors are gone’ and it is instead ‘the museum-goers…who constitute the live, performing bodies’. The practice is such that we ‘rehearse with our bodies…the immeasurability of the loss’ and in doing so ‘perform acts of reinterpretation’. In these acts, we assume a ‘conditional subjectivity’, which materialises a ‘Holocaust performative’ in the interstice between the ‘historical real’ and the ‘live, embodied, disappearing moment of performance’. If the Holocaust performative points to the constitution of the idea of the Holocaust