

## Introduction

### By Jonathan Horowitz

Three and a half years ago, the Jewish Museum invited me to come up with an exhibition that addressed the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the United States and around the globe. It could include work from the collection of the Jewish Museum, other sources, my own work—the invitation was open. *We Fight to Build a Free World* is the result.

Today violent acts against Jewish people in the United States are at a historic level. Continuing a trend of the past five years, 2019 represented the highest number of anti-Semitic hate crimes since the Anti-Defamation League began tracking them in 1979. This drastic rise in incidents—and it should be noted that hate crimes are vastly underreported—is not limited to Jewish people. Violence against Black, Muslim, Latinx, and LGBTQ individuals has increased alarmingly over the same period as well, often in acts the government does not designate as hate crimes. For instance, Black people in the United States are killed by police at three times the rate of white people, and 2020 is on pace to have the most police killings of Black people since 2013.

Clearly, the rise in anti-Semitism is part of a broader political and cultural scourge. Ethno-nationalism has become a dominant political force in the United States, as it has around the globe. The current crop of authoritarian leaders and their xenophobic rhetoric call to mind Europe in the 1930s. It is within this broader context that I chose to think about the show.

I started with some basic questions, like:

“Where am I?”

America, the Jewish Museum

“What is America?” “What is the Jewish Museum?” And “Who am I?”

Growing up, it was never possible to forget that I was gay. Every day, over and over, I heard the word “faggot.” Sometimes coming out of my own mouth.

I knew I was Jewish.

But “What is a Jew?”

I’m not religious.

I knew my skin was white, but I didn’t think about the privilege it afforded me. I think about it now.

I think more about being Jewish now, too.

The title of the show, *We Fight to Build a Free World*, is taken from a World War II propaganda poster by Ben Shahn. It begs the question, posed by this exhibition of art at the Jewish Museum, “Who are *we*?”

Equating the struggles of one group to those of another is not constructive, but common adversaries and common underlying causes of oppression must be identified and understood. And while you can never walk in another person’s shoes, art has a unique way of collapsing divides. Whether by way of an artist’s subjectivity, their personal story, or a character in a

movie, sometimes when you encounter a work of art, another person's experience can feel very much like your own.

The other day, I sat across from someone on the subway with the words "Love Is Love" tattooed on their neck. If "Love Is Love," does it follow that "Hate Is Hate?"

One thing I know is that the capacity to empathize is deep, and the need to unite, today more than ever, is imperative.

## The Exhibition

*We Fight to Build a Free World* is an exhibition curated by Jonathan Horowitz, a New York-based artist who for three decades has made work that engages critically with politics and culture. Under his direction, the exhibition looks at how artists have historically responded to the rise of authoritarianism and xenophobia as well as racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of bigotry. The presentation also addresses issues surrounding immigration, assimilation, and cultural identity. It brings together more than seventy voices, ranging from an eighteenth-century portraitist to contemporary artists commissioned for this exhibition. The works selected draw connections between historical oppression and the cultural and political challenges we confront in the world today. In these galleries Horowitz's own work serves as a bridge between the themes, spaces, and concerns of the exhibition as a whole.

Horowitz (born in 1966 in New York) works across mediums, channeling his ideas into the format that best suits his needs. His early work, primarily in video, reflects the influences of both experimental film and Hollywood movies. In subsequent years Horowitz turned to other mediums—installation, painting, sculpture, photography—to explore subjects ranging from environmentalism to the American political process. Much of Horowitz's work appropriates imagery from popular culture and art history, and whether through credited assistants, public participation, or curatorial projects, several bodies of work involve others in their making.

***We Fight to Build a Free World* was originally scheduled to open in March 2020. Days before the completion of the installation, as final labels were being printed and painters were touching up the walls, the Jewish Museum temporarily closed due to the global pandemic. Since then, the world has changed. The brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, unleashed a wave of protests and outrage across the country. There is an intensifying awareness at this moment of how systemic racism functions at all levels of society. In the wake of these dramatic events, the topics and questions raised by this exhibition are seen in a new light and with ever-greater urgency.**

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