

Curing

On Erez Israeli's Works

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Our concern with history... is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.

-- W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*¹

Nearly familial relationships pervade Erez Israeli's workspace: cement sacks, water and sand, iron lattices and plaster molds, pairs of black army boots cast in concrete. Photographs documenting the artist's violently shaved and sewn upper body are stacked on the wall, while in the opposite corner, Holocaust yellow badges are juxtaposed with dozens of framed postcards of World War II youth-sailors. Installed in the center of the space, a near-theatrical *mise-en-scène*, is an elongated wooden table set for four, its elliptical circumference surrounded by narrow railway tracks on which German freight cars circle endlessly and produce a faint yet disconcerting rattle.

Merely suggested in the photograph, Israeli's overflowing workspace is indicative of an impossible cacophonous investigation—a strange progression between foreign spaces and events that disrupts spatial and temporal axes. Through slow, melancholic and gloomy investigation, Israeli's work fuses local cultural catastrophes to their accompanying moments of personal frailty and institutional sanctity. Exposing a genealogy of destruction and mourning in his own flesh and in his relatives, Israeli marks moments of destruction in order to

prick, sharpen, and shed light on the content, meaning, and motivations underlying cultural catastrophes.

Blending historical catastrophes and current ones, Israeli generates meaning through the exposition and exploitation of attending cultural myths. Undermining society's imagined certainties, Israeli's work constitutes, in nearly militant terms, what Roland Barthes calls "the only possible weapon against the major power of myth"—the reconstruction and invention of artificial mythology.² Israeli's use of distorted systems of representation spawns alternative myths that emphasize the artificiality of myths and generate new political meaning. This operating principle may be regarded, after Gene Ray, as the use of conventions of imitation and illusion to recreate trauma through artistic means. Israeli's work imitates the shape of a traumatic wound in order to conjure up historical traumas, thereby enabling us to confront them again. However, this confrontation is experienced as an illusion—giving the sense that this is not real; only art—which seems to transform the work's unsettling nature into mere aesthetic pleasure. However, might this mimesis of a wound itself have the potential to traumatize? Might the unprepared viewer, abruptly encountering latent meanings, experience the opening of a new wound? What seems to threaten us here is a representative *mise-en-abîme*, which undermines the aesthetic experience and subverts the distinctions between original and copy.³

Similar tactics are distinctively evident in Israeli's earlier works. Thus, for example, he presented memorial wreaths cast in concrete (*Untitled*, 2003),

and stitched the gerbera flowers associated with them to his naked flesh, plucking off the petals and stamens in sharp violent motions (*Untitled*, 2004). The act of sewing reappeared in the video *Jewish Lesson* (2009), in the course of which Israeli produces a replica of a Holocaust yellow badge, which he then sews to his body. In *God, Abounding in Mercy* (2004), Israeli is seen nestling in his mother's lap, repeatedly slipping from her feeble arms. The mother's helplessness recurs in *Untitled* (2006), during which she piously plucks white feathers from her son's naked body. Israeli's engagement with expressions of violence and nationalism is manifested, *inter alia*, in the installation *Heads* (2008) which presents terrorist heads cast in concrete, laid on the ground. Constantly oscillating between photography, sculpture and video, Israeli's art identifies the rifts and antitheses in collective imagery, generating a new synthesis of values.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the first object encountered in the exhibition ("Curing," 2010) cites Joseph Beuys's famous performance, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (Düsseldorf, 1965). In that work, Beuys covered his face with honey and gold leaf and walked around the gallery cradling a dead hare, mumbling to it about the drawings hung in the space. In a peculiar incarnation of the Christian Pietà (the Virgin Mary cradling the dead Christ), the mourning mother is replaced by the shaman-artist, the traditional golden aura has spread onto the artist's face, and the crucified Son is exchanged for a hare. Beuys is identified, most of all, as an artist who embodies a peculiar fusion of the personal and the national; someone who

toiled to present himself as a super-artist, a martyr, reborn when his plane crashed while he was a combat pilot in the Luftwaffe (German air force). According to his own account, he was rescued by Crimean Tatars who devotedly anointed his body with fat and wrapped it in felt. By using identical materials and the shamanistic practices he learned from his saviors, Beuys himself, as he frequently declared, engaged in his works with rectification and healing of post-war German culture.

In Israeli's case, however, the danger becomes more immediate when the traditional Pietà is turned on its head once again; this time, with little chance for rectification. Here the artist-shaman is the crucifix, cast in the lap of the hare, who laments the lifeless figure of the martyr. The catastrophe, it would seem, is no longer mendable, since the agent of healing no longer exist. But the reversal performed by Israeli is pushed to the limit—the implied disaster approaches the very real and intolerable when we are suddenly exposed to the Torah Scrolls cast in concrete. Beuys's use of liturgical aesthetics (like the shaman's suit and the leaves of the golden aura that enable him to perform his healing rituals) shifts meaning when materialized in the jackets of the Scrolls (originally made of velvet and embroidered with golden thread). The artistic and the Jewish rituals merge when these contrasting objects and spaces blend. Resembling desolate graves, the Torah Scrolls coalesce with the similarly lifeless body of the artist-shaman.

In this respect, the mounting of the Scrolls on concrete bases is crucial for the generation of a ritualistic and religious atmosphere. Namely, the work must be

staged in order to acquire its strength and strike hard. Just as in Constantin Brancusi's works—as explained by Rosalind Krauss—it appears as though the sculpture strives to fetishistically take over the base on which it was installed. The sculpture is turned downward, seemingly absorbing the base and detaching it from a specific place.⁴ In Israeli's work, the installation of the Torah Scrolls on concrete bases indicates not only the absence of place as in the case of Brancusi, but a more fragile and threatening aspect. The amputated torsos suggested by the Torah scrolls tend toward abstraction and thus emphasize the absence of the other body parts which otherwise might provide equilibrium and cultural balance. In Israeli's work, the trauma marked by the absence of place and body exists both in the diachronic-historical sense and in the synchronous-current sense. What we are exposed to is thus an indication of a historical catastrophe, but at the same time, it is also the marking of a present, immanent catastrophe whose catalyst, it appears, is the same.

The artistic object, Beuys once argued, should not "generate a catastrophe," but rather "explore the content and meaning of catastrophe."⁵ Similar to the healing process Beuys proposed, the work finds a way to trigger the catastrophe by means of indirect tactics, opening the door to confrontation of what Slavoj Žižek has termed "the traumatic kernel."⁶ When we are exposed to the concrete scrolls, we are so close to the nucleus of the catastrophe that it becomes irreducible, and since it threatens as much as it thrills, we are exposed to the sharp and painful blow of the sublime. The artistic sublime in this case is not the wound itself, but a mimesis, an effective imitation and a

type of inferior trauma. In the sudden and immediate exposure to this sublime, if this is indeed possible, the opportunity is created for real mourning and for new ways to confront it.⁷

Indeed, there is no guarantee that this act of recollection, or the refusal to forget, will have a political or critical echo. In the dialectic of memory and forgetfulness, the establishment has long annexed the public memory of social and cultural catastrophes. Israeli's work indicates that the danger inherent in nostalgic fetishization of memory is real and that the social price to be paid is high, even if not always immediate and clear. What is thus required is not a rejection or devaluation of mourning, but rather full commitment to the logic setting it in motion. Such a commitment implies the transformation of mourning into a political category and its exploration by radical social means. It is a mourning that belongs among other revolutionary practices of those who wish to be delivered from the catastrophe. Either way, the resounding question that is echoed by the freight train's rattle on the Sabbath table and the disturbing silence of the concrete scroll-graves is how we might learn to live, how to survive, despite everything.

Notes

1. W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 72.

2. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), p. 135.

3. Gene Ray, "HITS: From Trauma and the Sublime to Radical Critique," *Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 2 (March 2009), pp. 135-149.

4. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 30- 44.

5. Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979), pp. 21-23.

6. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 87-128.

7. In this I follow Gene Ray's discussion on the radical political dimension of the category of the sublime. For an elaboration in the context of Beuys's work, see: Gene Ray, *The Use and Abuse of the Sublime: Joseph Beuys and Art after Auschwitz* (Florida: University of Miami, 1997).

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