

The Other - Buried Sites of Memory

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How memories of the past influence the present? How persons in today's Israeli society, migrants from Europe, conceive their personal identity between two homelands? What happens on the 'internal' migration route – what a person chooses to adopt in that process, and what is buried under layers of oblivion.

What can a black wax tablet, titled *The Other*, (size: 25 X 105 X 3.5 cm) mounted on the wall – sitting on a Plexiglas support, similar to an archaeological find, tell us? Could it be a piece found from the future? Is it a piece from the past?

A line of written letters – created by pins inserted into the wax tablet– appears partially covered by what may look like a volcanic eruption. The sentence inserted in the tablet is a free-extension of the notion *The Invisible* by Merleau-Ponty. Does it give a clue to the find? What are the pixels created by the pins, what do they tell?

Is the image in a phase of appearance/emergence – a discovery of a new reality/culture/memory or is it sinking, disappearing?

The motivation in this work, as well as in two of my video works discussed, is to reveal what is already present but may be obscured and thus to illuminate the linkage between memory, history and processes of migration.

INTRODUCTION

My focus in the comments that follow is on processes of remembering and forgetting. In particular, I wish to offer an observation, grounded in my recent works (two video works presented below), on how these processes are governed by history and ideology and how they affect the formation of personal identity. I will emphasize the interdependence of memory and history in the context of border crossing, i.e. migration from established or ancestral homeland (Europe) to a new homeland and to a new culture (Israel). The tension between memory and history, between the historical record and other received narratives about the past, and the adaptation of new narratives is discussed in the context of today's Israeli society. This society consisting of, among others, European Jews who immigrated to Israel after the Second World War (in different periods) and native born Israelis underwent tensions and changes in the process of building a new society, a new collective memory in a newly born state.

Through discussing and analyzing the video works *Between Homelands* and *Name* (by the author); two paradigms of memory are mapped, relating to the existence or absence of trauma in the context of memory and its influence on forming of personal identity. Those paradigms are mapped on the background of the changes in the transforming Israeli society, mentioned above illuminating the significant role of recording history versus recoding personal memory.

MEMORY, ISRAELI STATE AND DIASPORA - DISCUSSING NAME AND IN BETWEEN HOMELANDS

'Memory'¹ labels a diverse set of cognitive capacities by which we retain information and reconstruct past experiences, usually for present purposes. Memory is one of the most important ways by which our histories animate our current actions and experiences. Thus, memory, I propose in this context, can be defined as the storage of events that have had an impact on us and have left marks on our psyche.

As human beings, we ourselves are based on memory – the genetic code of our DNA². Since the “cell’s memory” is passed on from generation to generation, we are, biologically speaking, the memory of the past. At the same time, we contain what will become the memory of the future. French historian Pierre Nora argues that “Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies... it remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation...”³

Memory can be compared to a soft writing tablet upon which images, events, and the past itself are imprinted and etched.

The wax tablet *The other* (Picture 1), presents us with several aspects of the process of remembering and forgetting:

¹ The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP), online encyclopedia of philosophy maintained by Stanford University.

² Leonie Ringrose and Renato Paro, Epigenetic Regulation of Cellular Memory by the Polycomb and Trithorax croup proteins, *Annual Review of Genetics*, Vol. 38: 413-443, Dec. 2004.

³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*” (trans. Marc Roudebush), Spring 1989, 26: 7-25. In *Representations*, University of California Press.



Picture 1. The other (2003; 105 x 25 x 3.5 cm) - The invisible other the invisible culture the invisible reality

As far back as antiquity, the image of a wax tablet has been associated with the ‘inner surface’ of the soul; with the receptiveness of human consciousness; with its affective dimensions; and with memory. Yet wax is not only an image, but also a direct embodiment of the relationship between materiality and memory. Due to its unique material qualities, wax has historically served as a writing tablet, as a support for etching or stamping – and, indeed, as a tool of memory.⁴

Yet not everything is inscribed upon the tablet of memory. Just as light is absorbed in the black tablet, so memory swallows up those impressions with whose presence it cannot cope, those impressions that the psyche is unwilling or unable to represent.

In this sense, the tablet of memory is selective. It never shows everything, and must not express anything that will mar or crack its surface.

The process of inserting the pins is done by a pricking of the fragile membrane, of the skin containing, holding in, and concealing the chaotic inner flux – creates a sentence. It designates the wound, the mark made by a pointed instrument.

This PUNCTUM⁵ is where the moment of an authentic meeting occurs - when the process of marking by the pins points to the viewer's process of seeing, when he faces the black void and experiences a clear sense of impossibility to penetrate a painful experience of what may be historical testimony, an “other” reality, or other personal history that inheres in the writing.

In what follows, I will briefly map 2 paradigms of memory: one highlights the process of forgetting by denying memory, while forming a new individual identity; the other, an antithesis of the first, describes a pursuit of memory, a delving into memory gaps, motivated by the will to embrace and integrate the missing pieces in an effort to broaden the picture of identity.

⁴ Hagi Kenaan, Inga Fonar Cocos: *Viewer's Version, Where Are The Invisible Trains Headed?*, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, Cat. 2009.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).

I will demonstrate these 2 paradigms on the concrete example of Israeli society, a society based on immigration.

- In the process of emigrating, after the Second World War, from Europe to the newly established state of Israel (1948), the memory of many individuals underwent massive deformation as the sovereign ideology of their new home rejected the image of the weak, defeated diaspora Jew. Anita Shapira⁶ offers a distinction between “private memory” and “Public memory” when referring to this period. According to Shapira, the holocaust has been central in the collective, public worldview of the State of Israel. The Holocaust was used as a model for an existential threat to Israel, from which its policy was derived; as a significant model for exilic Judaism, that Israel sought to change, and as an expression of extreme anti-Semitism which Israel can prevent. Thus the Holocaust and its memory were conceived as belonging solely to the State of Israel, the only heir of the memories of millions. So the memory of the Holocaust was turned into a vast anonym memory, which was not possible to perceiving and internalizing by individuals. The Holocaust was a terrible myth, a part of history, and the personal and private story was suppressed and disappeared, and could not find its place in this period of collective memory.

- Astonishingly, according to historians, only in the last 15 years has it begun to become possible to deal with the lacuna of memory created during this immigration process.

- During the 1990s, Israeli society experienced a shift in the conception of its own history. In part, this change was a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing huge wave of immigration from Russia, and more broadly of an opening up between Western and Eastern Europe. The diaspora Jew now became a legitimate partner of the so-called new Israeli. These changes allowed Israeli society psychologically, to hold or containing within it a different approach, one previously excluded by the sovereign ideology that had set itself the task of fostering a new future history through the myth of the New Sabra⁷, or the rugged native Israeli. (Sabra was the term coined to describe the native Israeli, born in the 1930s or 40s, educated in the ethos of a love of the land and associated with a straightforward, rugged manner). The Sabra was designated to be the “New Jew”, as an opposite of the “Old Jew”, the Holocaust survivor. In the 1990s, a critical gaze at that formative period in history became legitimate.

The video work about *Wilhelmina* (Picture no.2), who emigrated in the late 1940s from Eastern Europe to Israel, where she still lives today, represents the paradigm of forgetting, suppressing memory.

This is an excerpt from a documentary video I made, titled “Name” (19:45 min. 2009), about people who at some point in their lives, lived under a name other than their given name. “Name” focuses on the name changing which characterizes the wondering Jew, immigrating and changing his environment. Five interviewees who lived a period of their lives under a different name from that bestowed to them when born, each appearing in different figures, conveys the essence of his existence. Dealing with present time, memory and pain, the film expresses the inner conflict of the characters and their confrontation with society.

The interviewees were photographed with a stills camera and their stories recorded, but their words are not heard. Fragments of their stories transformed into a sound-text piece reflect the layers of their feelings. The film illuminates the subject of the name through the

⁶ Anita Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews* (Tel Aviv, 1997), in Hebrew.

⁷ Oz Almog, *The Sabre – a Profile*, 1997, in Hebrew.

person carrying it, emphasizing the emotional load and conflicts which it creates by being a bridge between the individual and Society.



Video excerpt: *Wilhelmina* 3':15": Stills from video

Wilhelmina tells: “When I came to see the school nurse, she asked me what was my name and I said Wilhelmina. And she said: what kind of name is this? So I will be Zeeva, I said, because my grandpa was Wolf. You – Zeeva? You weigh 19 kg. We will call you Ziva! What a name, Ziva?...I was afraid.”

Wilhelmina's figure raises a crucial question: What is the significance of the shame this woman feels? She lives with the consciousness of a sense of shame that informs her whole being, her very identity. She lives with a vast lacuna, denying a major memory of her childhood, as well as her given name; indeed, in her own words – while still living, she buries a part of herself.

In front of the camera, at a certain moment, the concealed memory, which she had so hermetically sealed, is exposed.

Wilhelmina understood when she immigrated, that the transmission and conservation of collective values and an entire history of painful past events was to be sharply cut. Instead, a new identity and a new name signaling this identity were bestowed on her. From now on she was to have new future memories. As a result, it became all but impossible for her to contain certain parts of herself; the internal gaze is completely substituted by the external gaze – that is, by the newly constructed cultural conventions. She experienced a brutal eradication of personal memory by a new dictatorial future history.

Wilhelmina's personal biography is told in simple words; she does not use familiar cultural locutions with given significance (i.e. holocaust, trauma, loss, etc.). It is she herself confronting the event; not history of facts, but a history of a person.

The second paradigm, by contrast, is about remembering.

It is about digging into the memory gap in order to integrate the missing pieces of history into the complete story of the individual.

My video *Between Homelands*, (2008) representing this paradigm, is based on an ego-document: a collection of postcards which my parents collected during the late 1940s and 50s, which depict places and sites in Eastern Europe. This was, for me, the starting point of a voyage in time and in place.



Video: *Between Homelands* – 5':15"

STILLS FROM VIDEO

The video's description: Between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean Sea - a panoramic Polish landscape seen from a moving train is telling a story of constant impermanence and impossibility to settle down anywhere on the globe.

The moving images (the film consists mostly of still images) motivate changing rhythms of consciousness. By bringing together images of present and past, and of reality and memory, the film reveals hidden ties between remembering, trauma and self. This video work is based on a postcards collection from the 1940s and the 1950s Fonar Cocos' parents kept in a hefty album, black-and-white photographs that were taken after their return to Warsaw at the aftermath of the Second World War, and photographs that the artist herself took during a 2007 sojourn in Poland.

The original sound track is composed of a dialogue between two women; recite a poem by Polish poet Stanisław Barańczak.

My curiosity and my urge to acknowledge and confront the history concealed in the images of this album drove me, in 2007, back to my homeland – Poland. My aim was to collect present-time photographs of places and attempt to decipher the significance and context of the old photographs and the world they suggested, shrouded in what I had come to think of as a “white fog” – this familiar and unfamiliar feeling they projected. (Their un-canniness).

The video has a non-linear narrative structure and it juxtaposes images of the beautiful present-day Saxon Garden (Ogród Saski) in Warsaw, the Mediterranean beach of Tel-Aviv, and monuments memorializing the past with family photographs and abstract images of white void, while motivating changing rhythms of consciousness. - This, aiming to reveal the affinities between remembering, trauma and individuality.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Both paradigms that I presented here exemplify the dictatorship of history on the personal process of memory:

The threatening nature of an intrusion of even a trace of memory suggests the violence and the explosive energy that resides in the process of retaining memory of a trauma, as demonstrated by the wax tablet *The Other*.

Wilhelmina's process of denying her personal biography, which is shared by a whole generation, teaches us something important about ourselves and our society. We emerge as a community of immigrants that has paid the hefty price of partial self-death for suppressing some of its characteristics and surrendering to the constraints of History with a capital 'H'.

Between homelands represents a different generation that feels itself liberated from the ideological injunction to forget the past, and is indeed motivated to embrace the unknown, traumatic memories. And on a personal note: In his book *Blindness*, José Saramago describes the predicament of a man stricken by white blindness as that of “swimming through milk.”

I want to share with you the fact that this image resonated strongly in my mind during my work on this video. Combining blindness with some sort of vague, cloudy memory, Saramago's image captured my feelings about this other reality, which I knew is a part of me, of my own history, but of which I am not a part. I tried to touch on this childhood memory, without spoiling it, without touching.

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