DISABLED ART
Escapism as Artistic Tactic

Doctoral Artistic Research By ME

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Introduction: An Escapist Artist Who Tried to Kill Art

Escapology is the practice of escaping from restraints and traps. An escapologist, then, is someone who tries to escape, by a particular tactic, from handcuffs, straitjackets, cages, coffins, steel boxes, barrels, bags, burning buildings, fish-tanks or other perils. For a long time, performers have practised the art of escaping for its challenge or its cathartic effect, or even as a mere means of survival. Originally, it did not feature as an overt act in itself but was instead used secretly to create illusions, such as a disappearance act or a transmutation. The operation of escape always includes the danger of failure. Escape artists create scenes where they flee from difficult situations that seemingly annul their freedom and threaten their lives. Using magic and illusion, they manage to break free from the obstacles and traps in which they are imprisoned, leaving their audience amazed and confused (Dawes 193-201).

I shall use the practice of escape artists like Houdini as a metaphor for the artistic strategy of escapism. For me, Houdini is a source of inspiration due to his ability to triumph over all threatening dangers through illusions, tricks and metamorphoses. Houdini created staged emergency situations, from which he had to escape and survive. In other contexts, these elements could have been deemed: they could have been interpreted as perverse exhibitionism, bondage, mutilation, entrapment, suffocation, criminality, insanity or flirtation with death (Kasson 77-156). For me, these artful managements resemble closely those that appear in my own artistic practice. By addressing these manoeuvres, I shall develop the idea of Disabled Art.

In this research I shall explore, through the visual outcome and the case studies of my artistic practice, how my working techniques encounter reality through prevention, failure and escapism. Here, the character Escapist Artist (ME) symbolises the inability of art to reflect, process or contain reality. On the basis of my experience as an artist working and living in Israel, I shall consider the true ability of art to touch upon topics such as the Holocaust, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the feelings of instability and sense of belonging in a post-traumatic reality. The research focuses on issues that emerge from my artistic practice: authenticity, performativity, lack of hierarchy, anti-heroism, apathy, repetition and vulgarity. Developing these issues, I shall consider following kind of questions: What happens when art is not prepared or able to take actively part in reflecting on political and social contents? What is the role of the artist when art fails in its efforts to reflect and to be actively involved? How does art look like when the artist is simply tired? What is the role of such "disabled" art-making in the contemporary society?

The aim of this research is to create a body of knowledge based on my personal experience as a

visual artist over the last 10 years, during which I have been inspired by the idea of the Escapist Artist and following patterns of behaviour appropriate to it.

Mechanism of Escapism, understood as a basic artistic approach for creating modes of reflection and response, is explored in this research as an ideological, political and social default position. It indicates ways in which an artist relates to and is affected by the historical, political and social issues of the present. ME is a fictitious character writing letters. Like in my previous art works, ME is an imaginary character seeking for communication. In this research ME is corresponding with another fictitious figure, namely, his research.

The research addresses artistic inability by studying acts of erasure, disappearance, denial, reluctance, disintegration, absent-mindedness etc. in art. It analyses the artistic escapist approach as a method of expression, as an artistic starting point that allows for creative acts out of weakness, avoidance and basic survival instinct. The analysis involves the construction of the artist's identity in relation to the role of art today.

As an Israeli artist, I experience an internal conflict. On the one hand, there is the urge to be politically involved and to take part in the historical development of one's own society. On the other hand, there is the inability to confront Israeli culture and reality by artistic means. Over time I have found that my artistic practice explores the particular idea I call Disabled Art. It designates my condition of existence as an artist, one in which I am unable to respond to the political and social situation. Why unable? I have found that such a state of affairs is particularly acute in the case of Israeli artists like myself. As I travel around the world I am expected, as an artist, to reflect and consider in my art works the reality in which I live, and to relate my work critically and affectively to the complex political surroundings. However, through my artistic work I have realized that I achieve just the opposite of these expectations as I am unable to respond to the socio-political situation and to create art works relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the occupation. Consequently, it is my contention that art cannot really engage in such issues. Therefore, I have chosen the Escapist Strategy as a means to deal with such situations. The Escapist Strategy incorporates methods of artistic self-effacement such as hiding, dressing up and pretending, deleting and blurring lines of identity and losing one's sense of belonging to a land, nation or city, that is, a place that can called "home". The result of such a strategy is ME, a fictitious character without a clear identity, one that acts like a ghost, hiding itself, pretending and constantly changing.

My artistic research is motivated by the following questions:

1. What does an escapist artwork look like?

2. How is an escapist artwork carried out?

3. How can escapist art be taught?

4. Is the notion of escapist art a legitimate approach to art?

5. What happens when the artist tries to kill art?

The writing method

The research is carried out in the form of fictitious correspondence. The researcher (ME) writes letters to an addressee (Mr. Research). In these letters, the writer considers artistic escapism with regard to its visual expressions and its relations to reality. The research attempts to explore, by means of personal letter writing, how and in what way the visual nature of certain elements of collective memory dictate and influence artistic behaviour. Producing a body of knowledge in letter form, the research reveals evidential traces of thoughts, fears, opinions, questions, etc.

The method of letter-writing is planned to enable an informal and uncensored mode of communication, one that offers the required freedom for the writer to reveal his thoughts and doubts regarding the creative process. Together, the letters construct a time-line, offering a glimpse into the private world of ME.

The chosen method allows a reactive-reflective response of the artist to his environment and enables him to question the legitimacy and responsibility of art-making today.

The research is presented in the form of letters written by ME – an artist born and working in Israel. Through the letters, the writer produces a first person singular relation to his topics, revealing so the communication system of an author waiting for answers. In the absence of answers, the writer tries to create a self-reflective dialogue, based on intuition, expectation and experience. The lack of response from the recipient allows ME to continue asking questions with a sense of anticipation. Through the letters, ME, the author of this research, aims to discuss, dismantle and investigate the elements of particular concepts and visible phenomena, and reactions to them, engaging with questions of local identity, insofar as it is visually expressed in terms of place, time, a sense of belonging and escapism. Just as the artistic escapist behaviour first gains shape through the letters, so is also the recipient (Mr. Research) constructed as a fictional and absent character through the chosen mode of writing. His absence in the correspondence is essential in that he does not belong to any specific place and is devoid of identity. Writing to such an irrational figure allows for reflective writing independent from place and time. It enables an inquiry into the identity of the writer and the

addressee. By reporting and asking questions on the artistic process of the author, the series of letters exposes an exploratory process that investigates the *Mechanism of Escapism* and outlines the figure of "disabled artist".

The letter-format

The letter-format is designed to be thematically consistent: each letter discusses a single topic or idea, to be further divided into sub-chapters. The letters consist of notes, quotes, drafts and other relevant research material, on the basis of which the research is ultimately realized in the correspondence. Written in different locations at different times, the letters do not bear a clear indication of belonging to one place or another. The letter-writing produces knowledge in linear fashion (each letter being sustained by previous ones) so as to create a feeling of contextual time-line. The issues and discourses are thematically developed from one letter to the next. However, the letters do not indicate "good communication" as there are often breaks and crises and no "happy endings".

The approach aims at consistency insofar as each letter deals with a core concept and raises certain issues and questions connected to it. The letter-format presents a one-way communication: the writer continues to send letters, even though there is no response from the recipient. The lack of response is a significant condition of the writing process: it allows the writer to keep asking more questions. The act of writing is an integral part of my general creative process as an artist. However, there is a distance between the act of writing and the research through the art works. This aspect of the process produces a critical space accompanying my working process. The style of writing tries to maintain a balance between fiction and realism as well as between the public and private spheres.

The blurred boundary between the real and the imaginary provides a space for interpretation and speculation regarding the authenticity of the biographical details. The research incorporates a phenomenological approach, involving a systematic process of reflection that relates to the essential properties and structures of experience. The sense of duality, of simultaneous belonging and escaping, is inspired by the idea of belonging immediately to the world while also considering its limitations. The desire to belong serves as an impetus to write, while the desire to escape creates an inherent obscurity. The boundaries between the internal and external worlds of experience, between the personal and public, are not always clear; they are sometimes blurred or obscured. Thus, the private biography of the writer, of ME, remains obscure.

The letters are written in a personal style which produces a "safe zone". It creates the chance to address someone, in this case a figure that doesn't exist. Therefore, writing may become more

reflective and unrestrained, not worried about criticism or censorship. As mentioned above, the letters are all written in the first person singular, enabling expressivity and freedom that may serve wider-scale discussions about issues of public interest. The chosen mode of writing allows for the documentation of an ongoing escapist process – the developing time line, envisioned as a journey to an unknown place.

* It is important to note that the bricolage-like writing style of the letters is intentional. Since the whole setting of the correspondence makes use of fictitious elements, this might be interpreted as an authentication strategy, not unlike the blurriness or graininess added to a photograph in order to enhance its authentic feel.

* Translation of citations from Hebrew to English are my own.

Significant correspondences

The choice of the writing method of this study was partly inspired by letters written and published by artists and philosophers (summarised below). I have drawn ideas of these correspondences with respect to their structure, framework and style. In my letters to Mr. Research I have traced and re-enacted some of their stylistic features, contexts and structures and studied different techniques of letter writing.

Kafka's letters to Milena – The correspondence between Milena Jesenská and Kafka lasted from 1920 to 1923. Milena's letters were destroyed, so that the reader encounters Kafka's letters against the background of her absence. The emphatic absence of her words creates an effect of anticipation and loneliness that points out Kafka's necessity to write in order to survive. In my own texts the void is a crucial element which allows me to speculate and to involve the reader as a correspondent. "Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one's own ghost, which secretly evolves inside the letter one is writing or even in a whole series of letters, where one letter corroborates another and can refer to it as witness" (Kafka 223). Kafka kept on writing, so he claims, in order to fulfil a personal need and to maintain for himself a sense of significance. This is an example from which one may draw an outline for the writing method of this research: writing toward emptiness, creating a sense of anticipation.

Flaubert's letters – Throughout his lifetime, Flaubert corresponded with his close friends in a bold style, dealing with sexual contents and showing a particularly brutal or unpleasant approach. In those letters he exposes his writing process in a personal way, offers ideas, complaints and descriptions of sexual scenes, erotic dreams and perversions. At the same time, he discovers

philosophical insights through them and cites the writings of Aristotle and other philosophers who influenced him. Flaubert's writing is fluent and associative, sometimes automatic, impulsive or irresponsible, testifying to a rich and controversial creation process. It exposes an inner world of thoughts and images with many references to classic literature, mixed with daily life experiences. Flaubert's letters offer us abundantly evidence of his life-long research process (Cf. Flaubert). I find this combination of theory and daily life an appropriate approach to the question I work with in my own writing: how is artistic work assimilated into my daily life.

Letters from Vincent to Theo Van Gogh – The letters portray a dynamic relationship based on dependence, concern and familial care between Theo, the responsible brother and Vincent, the artist unable to cope with daily life, trapped in his own world of creation. The letters, bringing up daily routine without dramatic peaks or tragedies, consider issues both practical and spiritual. Vincent documents his ideas through attached images, sketches and drawings, using visual elements to convey his intentions (Cf. Van Gogh). Regarding my own writing in this study, I find that such a familiar and non-monumental approach is very important. It serves as a basis for a good writing flow, devoid of the need to prove or to impress, while retaining the low-key character of a research document.

Hannah Arendt & Gershom Scholem correspondence – The correspondence reflects the close friendship of the two intellectuals. The letters, which go back to the period of the great disaster for the European Jews, offer an important document of intellectual contemplation on their cultural tradition. This compilation of letters includes intellectual investigations which could be considered as qualitative research.

The relationship of Scholem and Arendt was a stormy one and developed from admiration and friendship to overt hostility. The critically minded Arendt was suspicious of any collective ideological labelling and so prone to undermine the foundations of the Zionist Jewish outlook. Scholem, in contrast, may be considered as a "true Zionist": he insisted upon the realization of the Jewish cultural and political renaissance in Palestine (Cf. Arendt and Scholem) Regarding this research, I find that the heated discussion between the two correspondents raises similar questions than the ones that concern me as an artist.

The principles of the research

Despite the reflective background motivations of my writing, the subjective and expressive appearance of the letters asks for explication of some general principles of the research.

1. The letters are written in digital environments (emails, smart-phones, chats, blogs, Google drive, Facebook, twitter etc.).

2. The style of writing: The Janus-faced author (ME and me) does not copy other writers, even if the letters may be influenced by their style and mode of approach. As noted above, at stake is re-enactment and mimicry.

3. The study follows ethical guidelines: it does not intentionally insult anybody, does not contain objectionable material and does not violate any copyright. This applies also the passages where textual collage techniques are used.

4. Each letter comprises a temporally and spatially limited body of knowledge. This means that the interpretations and analyses are changing during the course of the correspondence, in accordance with situational variables. The mode of approach of the study can be considered as that of classic constructivism, according to which humans generate knowledge and meaning from the interactions between their experiences and their ideas.

5. Although the writing is presented as personal, the study aims to maintain appropriate analytical distance to its subject in order to develop a critical research discourse.

Research aims

The present study investigates the artistic approach of escapism. The approach is connected to the mechanisms constitutive of memory and local identity. Escapism is investigated, through its visual and conceptual expressions, as a performative artistic practice. It is articulated in terms of artistic reactions and social mechanisms of memory (collective and personal) and the concept of local identity, which in this case is my Israeli identity. Investigating escapism as an artistic strategy, the research considers issues which are significant for nationalism: memory, locality and the sense of belonging. As noted above, the letter-writing method offers an optimal platform for this kind of research: it allows for flexible movements, with regard to each subject, between the private and the public spheres.

Methodically, the research is based on the principles of qualitative research which asks, concerning human decisions, Why? and How? instead of asking merely What? Where? or When? In the present study, the act of writing is a creative process requiring similar creative decisions as any work of art. In the letters, I aim to reflect and analyse my artistic working process as a particular behavioural phenomenon, as an escapist one, and try to investigate and understand the implications of its nature.

The framework within which I attempt to grasp the complexity and significance of escapism as an artistic approach is based on the "engaged theory". It functions as a framework that moves from the empirical analysis of phenomena of human and social behaviour towards abstract theories which reflect on social and political order (James 44-46). As part of the research process, I try to combine the biography of the artists with artistic motives and products. I try to make of biography a means of investigation. Here, I deliberately focus on examples of failure and disruption. Through these cases – my own included – I try to question the motivation to engage in art making and to questions the power and significance of art under conditions of failure, avoidance, disability or dysfunction.

Regarding the analysis of conceptual issues considered in the letters, my approach is informed by Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics. For Gadamer, understanding and language are at the core of human existence (Langdridge 50-51). Gadamer transformed hermeneutics into an art of interpretation and translation of reality. Based on the central role of language in Gadamer's hermeneutics, I think that man's existence is verbal in essence and human nature is universally experienced through the word.

In this study, the letters function as documentary evidence outlining the transformation of the artist leading into the state of escapism. Each letter marks a particular point of the process which allows for a different approach to the idea of Disabled Art.

In the letters, I emphasize theories of memory (public and private) as factors having a direct impact on my practical decisions. I relate myself to Paul Ricœur's theories on memory, history and forgetting. "In what way […] are the vicissitudes of the exercise of memory likely to affect memory's ambition to be truthful? In a word, the exercise of memory is its use […]" (Ricoeur 57).

Although the letters form a kind of diary, they are not intended to serve as auto-ethnography, even if the style of writing might give this impression.

In the present study, the writer remains a transparent figure who does not belong to any specific place, although he is Israeli and does live in the present. The presented reflections are not auto-biographical; they are strategic and engage with broader issues regarding the personal experiences of the writer. The style of writing is designed to make possible a monitoring overview of the phenomenon of disability and therefore of escapism in art. With regard to this aim, the truth of the described events is irrelevant.

The notion Disabled Art is a complex one, affected by many real factors and raising many important questions about the future and relevance of contemporary art making. The notion originates in my

experience of dealing with the reality in which artists work in Israel. In this study, I want to examine the nature, impact and consequences of that reality on art and its relation to the society. I intend to provide a rich body of knowledge about artistic "escapism" by studying it thematically in relation to my own practical experience of it as an artist. The introduction, the letters and my artistic practice (documented in the appendix), of which this doctoral thesis consists, aim as a whole at presenting a work in artistic research investigating the idea of Disabled Art and The Escapist Artist.

Dear Mr. Research,

I am aware that this is not a normal thing to do.

We don't know each other, and I am not even sure about your existence. Still, I find it very important to correspond with you under the circumstances I find myself.

The urge to write to you is born out of the current situation in which I call: 'Disabled Art, Disabled-Artist'. It is a plight that stands at the core of my 'artistic behaviour': an investigation in which artist and his art are not able, or refuse, to cope with reality through artistic means. Disabled Art is not only a state of mind. It's an artistic practice that is based on responses and reflections on reality. My letters to you will be the outcomes of these reactions. They will be a form of self-reflection, which can also be understood as an 'escapist artistic behaviour'. In other words: these letters are outcomes of mechanisms of escapism. The writing will allow me to keep a distance from you and from my artistic practice, and maintain certain reluctance to the 'real world'. Through our one-way correspondence, we can establish an intimate and secure dialogue. It will be a safe channel of communication where you could treat me well and take care of me. Although we don't know each other, I trust you. I am not expecting immediate answers, but I'd like to discuss and share with you my thoughts and burden as an escapist artist. You see, the escapist situation is complex and multi-faceted. It can be extremely tricky. My actions might be seen as a betrayal and dysfunction, so our common journey will not be easy. I will promise you things that I won't be able to keep. I will make every effort to destroy this relationship. I will trick you and sometimes even lie. Please be suspicious and don't believe to everything that I'll write. At some points, I will probably let you down and betray your trust. Therefore, these letters will function as a confessional, a space where I can confess and purify my soul and body, time and again.

With kind regards,

ME

"Nationalistic art is art which comes from the heart and goes in harmony with the heart of the nation [...] In order there to be a nation, there must be a land. In order to create nationalistic art, we need national pride." (Schatz qtd. "ha'Hazon Shel 'Bezal'el' 1906-1929 ['Bezal'el's Vision 1906-1929]." ha'Machssan Shel Gideon Ofrat, 16 Jan. 2011. Web. 22 Aug. 2015.)

Letter 01: About Fatigue

January 7th

Dear Mr. Research,

I start writing to you with a sense of extreme fatigue. It is the personal despair of an artist who comes from a particular place and carries with him his own locality, who is unable to deny or to avoid being affiliated with his local nature. You are probably asking yourself now, what do I mean by "locality"? And why am I so exhausted?

One of the main themes in my artistic work is the preoccupation with "locality".

Fig.1. *The Hanged Man* [from the Rider-Waite tarot deck], 1909.

Wherever I work, the issue of belonging to a place, society, culture or environment constitutes my starting point, or my excuse, for making art. The tension between the art work and its place enables me to ask questions about identity, mechanisms of memory and my role as an artist. But first, I would like to describe you what the notion of locality

means to me. Is it imaginary? Symbolic? A place to live in? Does it symbolize territory or borders? And what is the meaning of belonging to a place in relation to the artworks that I produce?

Israeliness, Jewishness and other-nesses.

As I refer to the "sense of belonging" as locality, I am thinking about *The Hanged Man* image in the Tarot cards.

It depicts an inverted person. In Christianity, is understood as a shameful character, a traitor, whose punishment is crucifixion upside down. In addition to many other things, the card represents a person become paralysed and numb, being forced to take life as it comes. It reflects the need to suspend the action and, as a result, it may indicate a period of indecision. Needed decisions or actions are postponed, even if it would be urgent to act.

In other contexts, the character may be read as a proxy of the self, the perfect martyr, acting as an autonomous unit, having its roots growing in the wrong direction, claiming for his own authentic history.

In comparison to my own condition as an artist, the figure of *The Hanged Man* reflects a state of being in which I am subjected to the society through my artistic practice. It is a figure of constant search for identity and roots, since it is constructed by external factors. How does this state look like in real practice? Is this numbness a crucial condition for survival?

When I try to speak about my works, I feel that the words I use are infected by a sense of locality. It is like an unclear smell, perhaps one that invisibly intoxicates the environment, which envelopes my words. It creates an atmosphere in which it feels right and natural to speak about my artistic process, or just to describe its outlines, in relation to the place I come from. Most of the time it is something unintentional. The phrases I use are expressions derived directly or indirectly from political, military, religious and social communication. Occasionally, it can become a violent language, not restrained or polite, in which things are described in terms of shooting in all directions, or of keeping my own borders - expressions that can be quickly loaded with other meanings in relation to the place I'm coming from. My artworks are saturated by locality too. What matters, however, is not being Israeli or Jewish but considering the

sense of belonging to a certain place. It is a test about the ability to inhabit a particular place. Where does this need of belonging come from?

This Place

This Place is a wide scale exhibition, curated by Charlotte Cotton and Nili Goren, which took place in the summer of 2015 in the Tel Aviv museum of art. It is a monumental artistic endeavour set going by the photographer Frederic Brenner, "who believes that only through the eyes of great artists can we begin to understand the complexities of Israel - its history, its geography, its inhabitants, its daily life - and the resonance it has for people around the world" ("This Place" n.pag).

This Place gathered eleven photographers to reflect on the culture, society and individual life both sides of the Palestinian Israeli wall. None of the participants had ever lived there, which makes the whole exhibition appear as a pure exercise of impressionism.

Fig.2. "This Place", exhibition view, 2015.

When entering the show, I felt the same fatigue of which I already spoke about. I recognized the obvious motivation of the local Israeli artists to produce politically and socially involved art that remains polite and appropriate for the tourist view. The exhibition was an exercise for wealthy people who came to see reality through expensive camera lenses and who, watching human pain and sorrow, were thinking about how to produce beautiful and interesting compositions. Photographers and artists not living here were asked by the curators to come to visit this divided country and to reflect on its complicated reality with artistic means. The outcome was an explosion of clichés: photogenic images, almost generic, presenting artistic perspectives on the conflict area.

The result was big, colourful, shiny and clean - bright like a pornographic candy, served to the eyes of the intellectual viewer. Through these elements and the way of exposition, every work of art immediately became monumental, full of political pretentiousness - or fake social involvement, I would say. Nothing in the photos remained without a sense of heroism or pathos. The photographers were fascinated by the exotic sights, and their gaze was a fascinated one, critical and yet very distant. However, what was most bothering for me was not the exhibition itself, but the motivation of the artists, and of the artistic institution: to deal in such a direct way with these issues. The interesting thing here is the motivation to create such an of artistic exercise. The museum, the curators and the artists all seem to believe in the power of art to reflect and to deal faithfully with this complex reality. The real question, however, concerns the capability of art and the artists to approach the complex situation by artistic means. Can art be ethically engaged and touch upon such matters? Can it be really involved socially or politically? Or will it always remain an illustrative decoration?

Fetish-land

The curatorial decision of the exhibition reflects the general, obsessive preoccupation prevalent in Israel, the questioning of the meaning of belonging to this land: Who belongs where? Who's right and who's wrong? The exhibition reflects Israel's intolerable situation, where no stone is just a stone. Everything is filled politically, historically, emotionally. Every corner is supposed to serve the occupation and the affiliation to the "promised land". The Holy land is a Fetish-land, where nothing is without signification.

Every stone in Israel is soaked with meaning: heroic, militaristic, historical, social, traumatic, post-traumatic. "Just a stone" does not exist here. It's an exhausting situation which mobilizes me as an artist to take part in the collective obsession with the land.

Fig. 3. "Just a Stone". Illustration by ME, 2015.

The obsessive preoccupation with the home-land originates in the identity politics of the nation that preaches solidarity. This hegemonic coercion maintains itself through the ideology of integration and assimilation. An Israeli artist who doesn't collaborate according to the contemporary nationalist standards may become a threat to society, one to be immediately brought to cultural trial. The result is either betrayal or exclusion. The nation-state is trying to dictate the aesthetics of art and thus its ethics. As the Israeli art critic Sara Chinski says, the nationalistic state works for neutralizing and dismantling supposedly subversive and dangerous substances which are not consistent with the standard identity (Chinski 326).

In my own way, I am an artist with discipline. The materials I work with are taken directly or indirectly from my personal Image Bank. It is a store of materials consisting entirely from my own memory which is determined through the years by the collective Israeli and Jewish memory. Like in automatic or instinctual behaviour, unconscious decisions are constantly made through the influence of the significant "locality". Sometimes I find that my working process is driven by the viewer's expectation: I feel that should create statements based on my way of belonging to a particular place. In a way I am expected to speak, within international artistic situations, in my own local voice. I am constantly asked: What kind of experience are you providing with respect to the place you come from? What do you offer your own society by dealing with the place you belong to? *Don't you care?*

January 7-8th

I can express that I care about a place, or belong to it, by producing an imagery claiming

to create a critical or socially involved impact. In what could be called involved art, the artistic actions could be translated into social-political voices speaking of resistance or change. Being politically and socially involved indicates a clear motivation to use art as a tool with which to reflect on reality, supposedly having the power to change it or to produce a true impact on it. At the same time, such an artistic attitude creates a sense of belonging and concern for the artist and defines him as a social activist, one serving his country in a proper way. What is my role as an artist in the society?

The Israeli artist Jennifer Bar-Lev once said, when talking about her works in a lecture, that the role of an artist in society is to be a cistern for toxin with which humans are filled. Being sensitive to the society's toxins, the artist attracts them to him- or herself. When I began to study art in Israel, importance was put on learning primarily about our self-understanding as artists with respect to the place and culture we belong to. It was about artistic decisions distinguishing us from all others: using specific styles and materials and producing an imagery that would reflect the place and culture. One of the main pedagogic ideas was called Want of Matter, meaning mainly the idea of creating art from meagre materials. This style is characterized by simplicity and austerity, use of basic materials and artistic sloppiness, and connected to the criticism of the reality and myth of Israeli society.

Fig.4. Lavie, Rafi. Bli Koteret [Untitled], 1977.

The ethical and aesthetic choice of using scarce materials occurred in the West for various reasons. It was natural in our country, I would argue, due to other reasons. We had to adopt this artistic language in order to associate our identity to the place and the land. The utilization of the language of "poor art" was, in fact, a way to indicate

local identity and belonging. The Want of Matter, a style intensly discussed in the late
1980's, became a common practice in the Israeli art field during the 1970's and 1980's.
The use of poor materials (plywood and cheap papers) showing crude craftsmanship exposed
the surface of the work so as to indicate a form of local sensitivity: a way to describe
the world through Israeli eyes. The adoption of this mannerism indicated a fruitful
dialogue with the basic needs of Israeli art dealing with the "here": the need to take
care of the roots, to find the local echo in the people's hearts, and to identify with the
local flavour. Sara Breitberg-Semel who coined the term defined it as a certain kind of
artistic Israeli autonomy, a monumental critical point of view. Artists who lived in
Israel and reflected on the collective nationalistic ideology adopted this practice in
order to claim for themselves their own artistic territory. The concept was coined in a
text that followed the exhibition Artist and Society in Israeli Art 1948-1978. The main
theme of the exhibition was Social Realism; it dealt with the necessity of artists to be
involved in and to contribute to the social realism in Israel. The question: Must we have
Socialist Realism? was answered: We must have pioneering realism. The point of departure
for the question was: What are the needs of society? This form of presenting the issue
indicates that the general mood in Israel had assigned a specific role to art in
determining the facets of society, and it demanded the participation and involvement of
the artists. (Breitberg 1986, n.pag.)

Fig. 5. Yosl Bergner: *Idealists*, 1978.

Through the deliberate use of materials conveying poverty, cheapness and inferiority,
artists created works that speak a language filled with local significance. So they
created a sense of belonging to the land and the nation. In my opinion, the conscious
artistic choice of using poor materials was made in order to serve and to contribute to
the fetishist conception of the land. This monumental position allowed the artists to

create a local identity and the feeling of being embraced by a community of artists who communicate with each other in the same way. This was not necessarily a bad thing, until it became a kind of didactic ideology leaving outside those artists who refused to cooperate.

Fig 6. Michal Ne'eman: *Ha'Einayim shel ha'Medina* [The Eyes of the Country], 1974.

So what's wrong? Why do I see it as such a burden?

The Eyes of the Country is an installation created by the Israeli artist Michal Ne'eman from the 70's. It is one of the most respected art works of the time. It was created in November 1974 on the beach of Tel Aviv. The artist installed on two midscale signs in turquoise colour the phrase "The eyes of the country".

The documentation of the work was presented in the exhibition as well. The exhibition catalogue dealt with the interest in working with boundaries and categories as tools of social and political criticism after Yom ha'Kipurim war in 73'. *The Eyes of the Country* is playing a dual role. The phrase was borrowed from military jargon, indicating the eyes of the soldiers watching the country and its borders. The eyes refer to viewing and maintaining vigilance which implies a sense of security. But here the eyes are the eyes of the artwork itself. Eyes that belong to the state and to the land, the eyes of the artist, associate the artistic act as a message of locality. This example reflects how many artworks were created under the demand to make a statement about locality. Using the simple stand, the poorest materials with no real value, signifies conceptually the period of rebuilding monuments or undermining conventions expressed by local phrases. But with it, local language is not changed or undermined. The criticism is carried out in that local language from which it was born. Searching for my own artistic practice, I still

have to use the local language in order to maintain the borders of my artistic territory. This means that despite the fact, that material poverty was endorsed already in the 70's, I see the necessity for local indications and use of local imagery in my work is a critical matter for constructing identity.

The mobilization of an artistic manifesto on behalf of the local identity generates forms of recruited art collaborating with the social and political system. The question arises: what is the real value of that today?

In her essay Shtikat Ha'daggim [The Silence of the Fish], Sara Chinski asks: how does a society create art in its own image? An important element underlying the question is the notion "involved art". One of the starting points of this kind of art - involved, critical, political - is the complete negation of the individual and individuality. "This artistic practice means working for the sake of the collective. It is not just any random collective for which the artist chooses to contribute, but The Collective which dominates, defining the identity of the Israeli-Zionist society" (Chinski I993, I08). In Israel, "involved art" means adherence to the collective ideas; the concept designates art's functioning for the state (I08). Chinski further claims that involvement means total social conformity and the maintaining of the existing order so that, even more importantly, the artist becomes an authoritarian figure of this order (I09). The critique is based on "the art of caring" aimed against self-centred individual, the one who cares only about himself. But the offered alternative denies the nature of society as an arena of critical opinions, free and rife with controversy. Social art, then, "accepts without complaint the normative outlines that mark the collective. Such art is not even thinking about criticism; it eliminates reflection as a legitimate act. Reflection or criticism is forbidden not only because it may thwart unnecessary questions, but mainly because reflection is radically opposed to action" (II0), which is the social contribution at the core of this art. In this system, all attention is directed to the artist who makes a most specific contribution to the system.

So where does my exhaustion come from?

As for today, the artistic practices in Israel have changed. Instead of using the visual language of poor materials, a search for personal expression and identity is taking place. The collective moment has diminished and has been substituted by an individual inner search. In my last works I tend to deal with materials which examine such questions as:

What are the cornerstones of my identity? Where do I really belong?

January I0th

Despite my attempts to get away from any social or political involvement I will probably fail. The reason is that is my existence in this place automatically turns me into a political-social prisoner. My fatigue is caused by a kind of erosion. I have surrendered myself to the given situation. A situation where I have no choice but to reflect the local reality in which I was born and by which I was formed. The Israeli reality imposes itself on my life. To live means to move from one war to another, to wait for war, to be afraid of war. Here, everybody is evaluated by the society according to his survival capability, his willingness to be involved and to take part in the national effort - to raise the national flag and state: "This is my place".

Therefore, I feel it is a natural necessity to take part in the process of social development. Because this is the way to do something meaningful. My condition can be compared to torch racing. The points that historians record in art history are points in which the torch has been delivered from one runner to another, while the delivered torch embodies the evolutionary process that keeps art running. As Chinski notes, this eliminates any possibility of workmanship, disruption or death of the artist due to his or her mobilized nature (Chinski I993, II3).

In this way I continue to be a fundamental organizer of the collective narrative of consensual art. It is a safe place to be as it produces a sense of belonging, meaning and value.

Boris Groys, in his e-flux text "On Art Activism", refers to this state as the aestheticization and spectacularization of politics:

"[…] the aestheticization and spectacularization of politics, including political protest, are bad things because they divert attention away from the practical goals of political protest and towards its aesthetic form. And this means that art cannot be used as a medium of a genuine political protest—because the use of art for political action necessarily aestheticizes this action, turns this action into a spectacle and, thus, neutralizes the practical effect of this action." (Groys 2014, n.pag.) [What will happen if I dare to say no?]

"Olive Tree"

Shafted, stuck among three coconut palms

in a layer of gravel from the Home Depot

in the middle of a junction turned overnight

into a square.

Motorists hurrying home

see it perhaps

through clay pots tilting over,

but they have no time for the twisted story

that rises from its trunk or the flat top of the tree,

trimmed with a building contractor's sense of humour.

Nor can they fathom their roots groping

in foreign soil

clutching mother earth

like provisions from home

since the soldiers cut them down.

The olives, offered and unwanted, blacken

my face

and no miniature roses will divert my heart

from the shame (Mish'ol, 7).
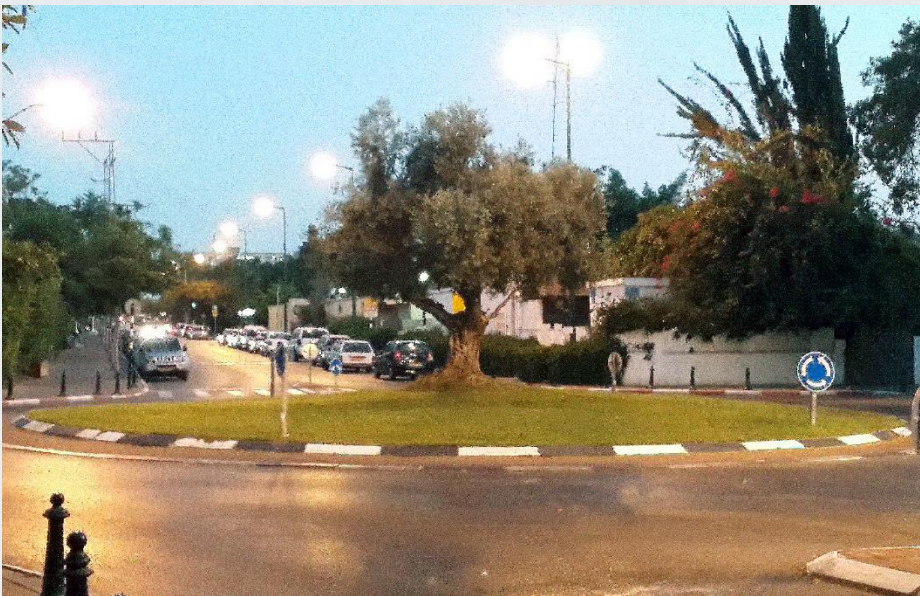
Fig. 7 "Olive tree square", Illustration by ME 2014.

Letter 02: The Monumental Text

October 18th

Dear Mr. Research,

I have moved (again) to a new home. I still cannot get used to the unfamiliar
surroundings. I guess it will take me a while. I wonder about the relationship we share
through these letters.

A monumental text

In my last letters, I described my Israeli experience of life as an exhausting one, due to
the situation in which every stone is saturated with historical-political significance.
Living in Israel, for me, requires the total mobilization of the individual in favour of
the collective hegemony: historical memory, political awareness, the Jewish country,
surviving the unknown enemy. Turning the individual body into a national flag makes
everything monumental. It is a relationship in which the one side gives and the other
continues to take. Referring to our own intimate (and one-sided) connection, I would like
to write you about the relationship between the artist and monumentality: about the way
local language determines artistic endeavours, and about the role of the local discourse
in my artistic process as an escapist artist.

Fig. 8. Aharon Privar: Min'ee Kolech mi'Bechi
[Keep Your Voice from Weeping], 1964.

The concept of monument refers to structures in public spaces with commemorative function. In most cases, monuments are built for political reason or due to historical events, so that their role is to specify the event which should be recalled for generations.

The Latin root of the word monument is *monere,* "to remind". This is an apt starting point for thinking about monuments. They are, after all, architectural / cultural reminders. By dealing with monuments in my artistic practice, I try to investigate the culture of remembrance and commemoration through its visibility. In the historical archive of Petach-Tiqwa in Israel, I found a collection of old photographs of various monuments. The monuments were built for the memory of the victims of war or for other events in Israeli history. The collection does not follow a logical chronological order. In most cases, the location of the monument is not specified. The collection is a random compilation of photographs of various monuments that were stored together due to an unknown reason. The first image attached here is of a monument placed at the location of the archive itself. It depicts a woman (a mother or a girl) who is sobbing and leaning on the shoulder of a soldier.

The faces of the two characters are hidden, so that the figures turn into symbols of war or bereavement. The characters are anonymous, and at the same time represent the public. This monument was built in the memory of the soldiers fallen in Israel's wars. It captures the moment of an eternal loss. Two figures, a warrior and his mother, remain forever in grief, not willing to part. The structure of this monument makes an impact. The exposed grey concrete, reminiscent of the architectural style of Brutalism in Israel, symbolizes the difficult material circumstances of life in this place, saturated with the blood of war and loss. But all the same, now I don't look at the monument itself, but at a photo of it. It is a picture of a monument. The photographic act, creating the picture, does not create a picture of the monument AS A MONUMENT. It is a picture of a detail referring to a story and telling something about the style, material, surrounding light etc. of the monument, but it is not directly a picture of the monumentality of the monument. The composition chosen by the photographer points to the drama of the monument and the photograph itself. Here, the monument loses its role for the benefit of photography that wants to record it and to "commemorate the commemorating". Some of the photographers in the collection are unknown.

Most of the photographs were taken by more skilled photographers, like this photograph by Kafri. I can tell that by looking at the frame which reveals a more balanced and accurate, symmetric and stable composition, clean lines and shapes and proper light metering that makes the scene dramatic and heroic, showing a unique moment of a monument in beautiful harmony. It is possible that these works were commissioned by municipalities or government officials for propaganda use or just as representative souvenirs.

Fig. 9. Mordechay Kafri: *Monument to the Memory of the Dead Soldiers of Gush-Dan*, I956.

An additional part of the collection contains photos being made by less professional photographers or amateurs. I find these pictures very interesting. They often have a snapshot character and they were probably intended for personal use only. Here, in this anonymous photograph the composition is less meticulous. The camera angle does not try to present a heroic view, it is less representative and more intimate.

Fig. IO. Monument in a Park [Unidentified place]. Photographer unknown.

In the more professional photographs, light and angles make the monuments appear in more respectable way, as if captured at the moment of their highest pride. In the amateur photographs, the monuments have a more everyday-like appearance. They are integrated in a natural way into the daily life of their surroundings. In some images, the monuments have become naturals part of the scenery, comparable to the trees, clouds and the sun. The motivation to capture a single moment of a monument's life tries to make of it a living entity, one that keeps on identifying the place and its story. Many of the unknown photographers assimilate the functionality of the monument into their own private needs, making of it a private monument for private use. Such fetishist aesthetics reveals a world of joy and satisfaction, of creation, an abstract spectacle of shapes and lines, cultural and individual pride, and especially the great need to turn the collective memory into a personal one.
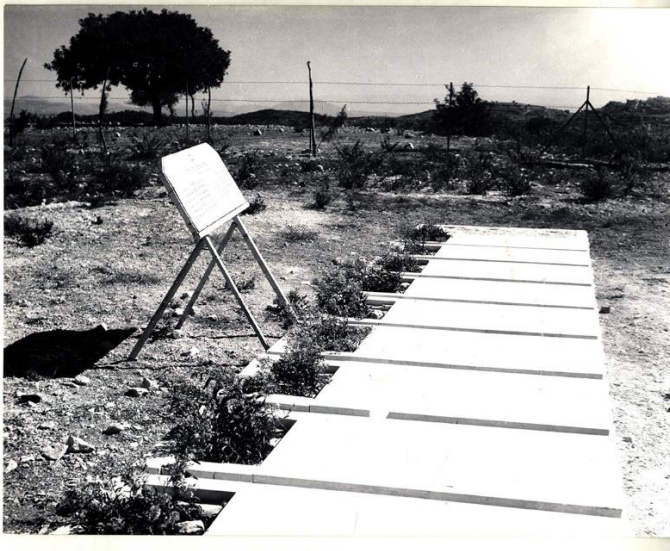
Fig II. Monument consisting of unidentified graves. Photographer unknown.

October 20th

Collecting Memory

Dealing with these kind of images, I am thinking about the photographic work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. For some ironic reason, I find an associative connection between the local Israeli monument photos and Bechers' photographs of the Gas Tanks. The Bechers present four principally different forms of gas holders or gas tanks in I40 photographs taken between the years I963 and I992 in UK, France, Belgium, Germany, and the United States.

Gas holders are containers for domestic gas, natural gas, and other gases. They provide temporary storage that allows the balance of supply and demand in municipal gasworks and industrial plants. Unlike water towers or grain silos (that the Bechers also photographed), in the which the materials being stored may harmlessly come into contact with surrounding air, gas holders may not be filled only partially. Gas holders must therefore be constructed in such a way that their capacity can increase or decrease in proportion to the quantity of gas. It is a question of pressure.

The Gas Tanks were photographed under overcast skies so as to give them a soft light environment, allowing greater attention to small details. The Bechers made no attempt to use these constructions in any conceptual context. The photographs contain only immediate information: time and place. As the photos document these industrial wonders, they are offered to be read through the aesthetic dimension of their subject. These photographs arouse a fascination for the industrial constructions' powerful shape and colour; the tanks are functional objects with which the artistic eye has fallen in love.
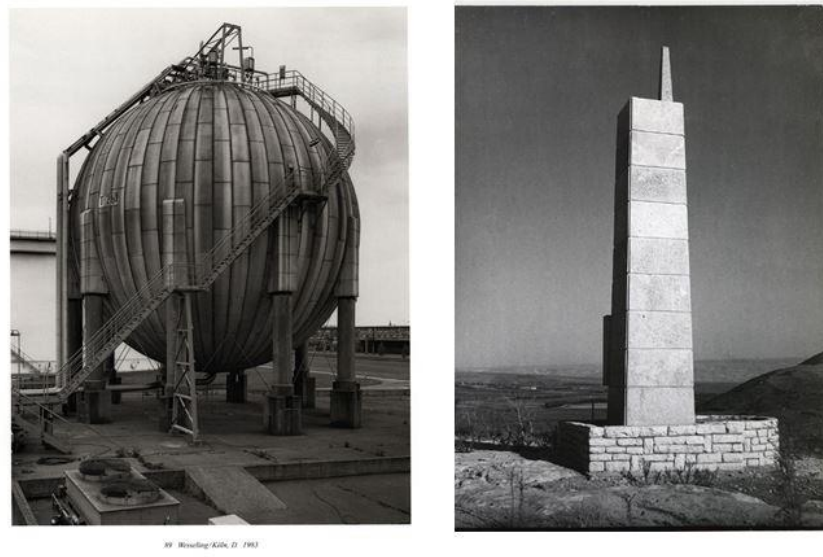
Fig. I2. Brend and Hilla Becher: (89) Wesseling / Köln, I983. Fig. I3. A Monument in memory to the Palmach fighters who died in Zaryin Battle, I948. Photographer: Alexander Studio.

At first sight, the similarity between these photographs is obvious. Both are photos of structures, one functions as a memorial, while the other one is an industrial object. In both cases, I can experience the fascinated gaze of the photographers: the search for infinite beauty, heroic symmetric angles, the attention to small details which reveal the severity and materiality of powerful structures. In each of the photos, a decisive moment was captured. In the gas tanks, the very expectation of the decisive moment is seemed to be erased through a careful choice of distance, angle, light conditions etc. And yet, the decision when to freeze the chosen moment within this static situation is born from the enchantment of picking up all those elements together, of telling the story behind the structure, and turning the great monumental objects into singular ones, into objects each one of which is one of its kind. The Bechers declared in an interview that their main interest in these structures arose from the fascination for the shapes and for the power of the industrial revolution - construction technology, the desire for progress, heroism and liberty of the human race, all this and more. Hilla Becher said that the main motivation of their project was to focus on the act of collecting: "We didn't really see it as artists, we saw it as something like natural history [...] So we also used the methods of natural history books, like comparing things, having the same species in different versions. The Typology is nothing but comparing and giving it a shape, giving it some sort of possibility to be looked at otherwise it would just be heaps of paper." (Becher n.pag.). It's all about collecting.

Blood to blood

Therefore, in typological photography, the obsessive collecting motivation of the Bechers'

has brought them to create a series of photos of monumental imagery which functions as a precious personal souvenir. The reading of these images can be divided into several levels, from the act of collecting them to turning them into something private: a personal, everlasting monument.
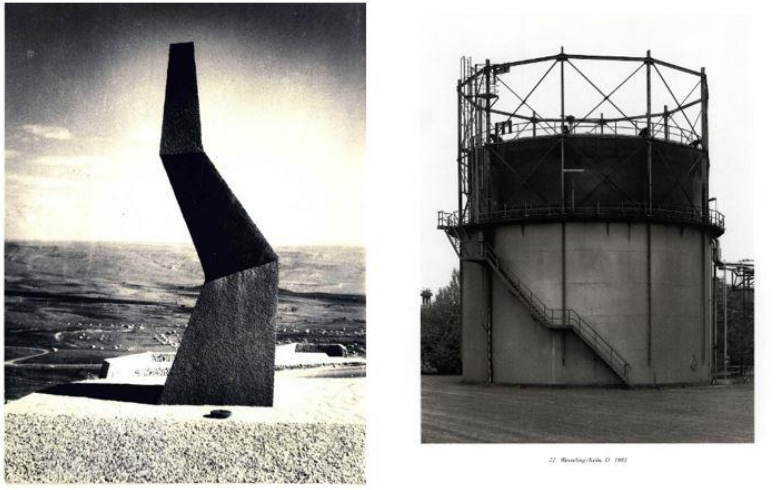

Fig. I4. Izrael Valley Monuments, Photographer Unknown.
Fig. I5. Brend and Hilla Becher: (22) Wesseling / Köln, 1983.

Unlike in the artistic attitude of Bechers, there is, in the Israeli monumental photos, no emotional separation between the appearance of the photographed object and its significant content. The Bechers make a distinction and perhaps ignore the fact that the gas tanks have their historical significance within European culture and the Second World War. The joy of their work comes from the act of collecting and from the fascination for the powerful structures. In the pictures of Israeli monuments, in contrast, there is no emotional separation between the monuments and the photographer. It is a story of love and passion happening in the act of photography itself. As the Bechers fell in love with the powerful structures, the Israeli photographers fell in love with the essence and significance of their object. They photographed public monuments in order to make them their own and to bring them home.

It's a Shared Language

Why did I choose this comparison in the first place? Why do I combine associations of Bechers' gas tanks and local Israeli monuments? Is it because of the "Jewish sensitivity" in relating visual signs with past events through a post-traumatic gaze? By this comparison, I reckon, I can bring up the idea of the Shared Language and the way it appears in my artistic practice. As an escapist artist I think that the use of the Shared Language is a way to create escapist art.

The Shared Language, as I see it, is a symbolic language based on association, one which is detached from the aspiration to memorize and cherish. For the critical artistic view, keeping on producing new monumental artworks means reviving over and over again the reason of being and living in the world. The Shared Language keeps on producing associative and emotional connections, based on collective or private post-traumatic states, between images from the past and the present. The urge to produce multiplied memorials of memorials maintains the private traumatic pride of the eternal victim. It is usually done by using heroic national symbols. Therefore, this language is based on repetition. The infinite use of monumental symbolism wipes out any notion of daily routine or casualty. Recycling the same symbols for all kind of purposes charges the artist and the art work with monumental significance.

At this point, I can identify the Shared Language with Zionism.

Therefore, I would like to end this letter with some notes on Zionism, through the approach of Jacqueline Rose. In her book *The Question of Zion* she refers to Zionism as Messianism due to the strange mixing of visionary and political power (Rose 5). Rose questions the core motivation of the Zionist movement with respect to a national post-traumatic observation. The contemporary Zionist violates reality by the idea of owning the ground of the people. In the spirit of the statement attributed to Israel Zangwill, a Zionist thinker from the beginning of Zionism: "a land without a people for a people without a land". The main generator of the Zionist system is the emotional background of horror. National trauma and the fear for history bring the nation to make of its psychosis a concrete reality. Anyone who might break or undermine the psychosis can immediately be perceived as a traitor or a terrorist (58-I07).

A good example for this is the staged photographic event of Neshot ha'Kotel [Women of the Wall] at which I took part in 20I3. Neshot ha'Kotel are fighting for the equal rights for religious Jewish women to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem as the men have. (Currently women are not allowed to pray there). As part of their struggle they turned to the photographer David Rubinger, who took the iconic photograph Soldiers at the Western Wall in I967, and asked him to stage and restore again his photo (at the same location and from the same photographic angle), but this time with female heroes. Rubinger accepted the request, returned to the same location where he had made the historical photograph with the soldiers, and then staged and directed the women by the wall just as he had done with the paratroopers.

The interesting thing here is the repetitive performative action of re-shooting a monumental event in order to appropriate it to a new content. This action was designed to revive the heroic situation and to place the fighting women in the same meaningful spot where the soldiers had been. At issue here is in fact an inherited identity based on the recycled continuity of national significance. Reusing heroic symbols allows to reuse national significance which determines national identity. My job was to document the performative act of re-photography.

Fig. 16. David Rubinger: ha'Tsanhanim le'Yad ha'Kotel [The Paratroops Next to the Western Wall]. 7 June 1967. Photograph. Government Press Office. Ynet and David Rubinger: Meshachrerai ha'Kotel 2012 [The Western Wall Liberators 2012]. Photograph, 2012.

Hence, I can conclude that in order to be a Zionist and use the Shared Language, I need to copy and trace the dictated values of Zionism, formed by the government or the society. These criteria are defined according to heroic and monumental values which determine who is a Zionist and who is not. In my creative process, I am interested specifically in these criteria.

When questioning them, it is tempting to break the Shared Language and to adopt other forms of speech - independently of place, time and identity. In one of my latest works I created a new

Fig. 17. Rubinger and the women of the western wall are being staged and photographed. Photograph by ME, 2012.

"social website" called In the Memory of… - DIY Monuments for every occasion. The website encourages people to design their own "dream monument" and to print it in 3D as a souvenir. The website is based on interfaces enabling the dynamic and interactive construction of personal "home-made" monuments in a variety of different styles, sizes and textures, for every need and purpose. Here are some pictures from the promotional catalogue:

Fig. 18. Details from the Company's Catalogue: Monuments DIY, From ME's collection 2015.

The website was developed with the aim of getting people to cooperate with the Zionist mannerism. It encourages to create generic monuments, and thus, to create behavioural mannerism indicating the need for basic monuments as consumer products, regardless of their functionality. In my work, I do not believe in attacking. I think that by cooperating with the social currents, by tracking them down, I can indicate their problematic nature or ridiculousness and break them down.

February I0th

מִסִּפְּכֶם נִפְרָדְתִּי...

נָטַשְׁתִּי תוֹרָתִי, פָּשַׁעְתִּי עַל-לָחֶם,

וּבְדֶרֶךְ אַחֶרֶת לְבַדִּי אָבָדְתִּי.

הָעִתִּים הִשְׁתַּנּוּ - וְהַרְחֵק מִגְּבוּלְכֶם

הִצַּבְתִּי מִזְבְּחִי, נָתַתִּי אֶת-סְפִי –

(Bialik, 307) אַךְ זֵכֶר עוֹדֶנִּי אֶת-כֻּלְּכֶם, אֶת-כֻּלְּכֶם...

I was not always an "escapist artist". When I started as a photographer, I took pictures of my surroundings, impressed by the beauty of the local landscapes. It was a natural habit to reflect on my relationship to this place, my homeland. I was trying to make it through photography without any cynicism. It was pure fascination. I respected the photos I made. Photography sharpened my sense of discovery as I studied the landscapes of the surroundings where I was born: I learned the materials and notions of the place I can call 'home'.
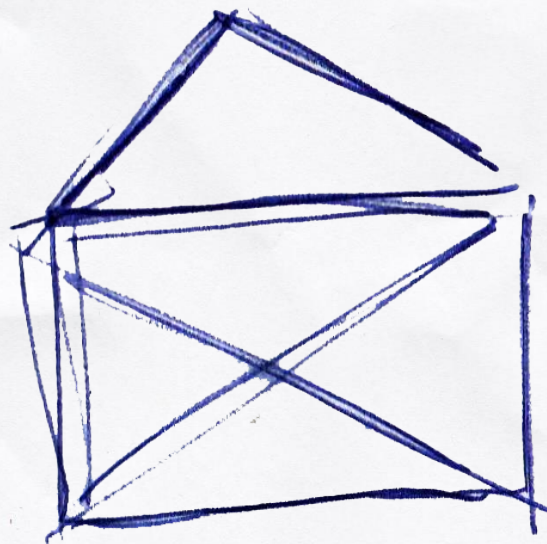
Fig. I9. My Sister in Front of an Orange Tree and the Moon. Illustration by ME, I990.

So, what went wrong in the last I0 years?

On the other hand, photography was, and still is, a great way of escaping. Starting from the camera itself: it separates me from reality. It produces an illusion of a safe area. Through the view-finder, I frame reality, organize its shapes and colours, and so create a separating screen between me and the reflected reality. The moment of the exposure is most significant for the separation: as the shutter opens to capture the rays of light onto the film, the view of the shooting eye is blocked; the blackening of the screen ensures a clear separation between the photographer and reality. The last necessary step for the detachment is the darkroom. I spent hours there. The dark room with red security light was a safe haven; no unwanted light beam there. Any unexpected invasion of light from the outside would have immediately burned the light-sensitive materials and violated the chemical balance of the fantasy world created by me in the dark. There I could carefully watch how images of the outside world were born from the white paper immersed in the liquid. In my last letter to you, I tried to outline what I call the "sense of belonging". I wrote to you about my approach to place or local identity as experienced by an individual. I referred to the sense of belonging to a land or a certain location called "home" as aroused through artistic involvement. The need for art works responding to the requirements of the society probably exhausted me over time. I found myself in a state of forced identity. I lost my belief in the power of art to engage with these issues. Every attempt to be an artist involved with real world has caused me great embarrassment. Who am I to consider these issues? Can I fill my supposed artistic duty without pathos, symbolism or heroism? Gradually I understood that I don't want to take part in the nationalist

celebration. My immediate response to the "disabled" condition of my art was to escape. The option to break away and escape from all social or political involvement means to escape from that place called "Home". "HOME: "The strongest sense of home commonly coincides geographically with a dwelling. Usually the sense of home attenuates as one moves away from that point, but it does not do so in no fixed or regular way" (Terkenli 324).

So I ask here, how can I set myself free and escape from any determination by a homeland or a local identity - from any relation to the idea that "this is my place" means "this is who I am"? Is it possible?

February IIth

Escaping: first attempts

Lately, an image made by the Jewish Artist Joseph Budko has puzzled me.

It is a woodcut depicting a young Jewish disciple who seems to have abandoned his Torah study books and jumps or is lifted in the air, facing a great, divine light. He spreads his arms wide in the air, as if trying to fly, perhaps possessed. He is lifted from a pile of black Torah books he has left behind, towards a freer, unknown place, a new hope, into a blinding light. Or maybe he is drawn there against his will, captivated in a mystical experience of power? What is he escaping from? And why?

Fig. 20. Yosef Budko: Sketch for the Poem "Zohar", I923. Woodcut. Jerusalem Artists' Museum House,Jerusalem

In his book, *The Return to the Shtetl*, Gideon Ofrat refers to Budko's obsessive interest in tombstones and cemeteries of his home town. In many of his woodcuts and etchings he returns to the subject, dealing with the tensions of the "living past". In 1928, Budko made an oil painting titled "The Return". According to Ofrat, it is a self-portrait of Budko symbolizing his return to his home town Plonsk in Poland. It is the return to the traditional Jewish world he had abandoned. Ofrat claims that his return is not an act of repentance, rebirth or revival but an act of reconnecting to the roots from which he had disconnected himself: "Bodko has united his depression with the depression of the Jewish fate, and weaved his existence within the Jewish attitude of 'No way out' of the eastern European Jews. Budko is haunted by the rupture of the Jewish world of yesterday, and is attracted and repelled at the same time[...]" (Ofrat 76) Budko's paintings testify to a repetitive act, the willed return to the sad districts of his childhood, to the hopeless place of his existence. Why does he keep on returning? Why is he dwelling on his past? As Ofrat claims, "Sorrow, pressure and loneliness are forming the will for freedom [...] Budko returns to his hometown to redeem it and to be redeemed by it" (77). Ironically, despite his desire to return and to deal with his past, Budko made a woodcut named: "Lo Yivrach Ish Kamoni" [A man like me will never escape].

Fig. 2I. Yosef Budko: Lo Yivrach Ish Kamoni [A Man Like Me Will Not Run Away], 1930.

Both figures in the woodcut are holding a wooden stick. The young man is holding it with great force. His right hand is gripping it and it can be seen as a weapon or means of

defence. The old man is leaning on it, holding the top of the pole, as if it were a back rest. The stick connects the two heroes of the woodcut. Here, the stick indicates the allegorical figure of the "Wandering Jew". Setting the two figures together, Budko has created a visual personification of the "New Jew": the proud, solid, robust and sober Jew, who does not deny the Jewish tradition, but keeps it by stepping forward.

The (almost reflexive) mechanism of obsessive returning to or leaning on the past is an act of reflection on historical and social content incorporated into my education and identity through the years. In my works, I have been repetitively dealing with questions concerning the ability of art to represent history and reality using these visual means or methods. As an Escapist Artist, I repeatedly use clichés, nostalgia, acts of imitation and impersonation in the artistic process, and translate them into escapist activities which provide a sense of liberation or relief (for myself). This gives me the opportunity to create for myself an alternative world, where I cruise without a real sense of belonging. I lean on the past with the attempt to get rid of it. I look for the definition of "liberation" in the dictionary and it directs me to words like freeing, redemption, purification. Can escapism liberate?

February IIth [Same day, Afternoon]

How about writing? Can writing be liberating?

When I write to you, I become something that I'm not. I am not a psychologist, and I'm not trying to write psychological analyses about the phenomenon of escaping. But I must point out some important facts when dealing with these issues.

The Norwegian psychologist Frode Stenseng has presented an interesting model of escapism by relating its behaviourial traits to different kinds of other activities. In his research, he comes to the conclusion that escapism can, as a behavioural phenomenon, be significant both positively and negatively. It produces results like self-suppression or self-perception of emotions, whereas self-expansion can stem from motives to gain positive experiences through the activity and to discover new aspects of self.

Fig. 22. Detail from the series Distinguishing Between the Sacred and the Profane, 2004. Illustration by ME.

In my works, I am not motivated by active resistance or acts of rebellion. My creative process is based on weakness, so that action is not combative or aggressive. I use instead, in order to escape, the methods of repetitions, imitation, and assimilation. There is an escape because of surrendering. I use the contents of my visual memory or imagination, as if memorizing them, and reflect on what is integrated into my DNA, believing that this might liberate me.

Creating alternative realities is translated into images that have been enacted in my memory and dictated into lines of identity and a sense of belonging to a possible place and time. The creating of alternative realities has allowed me a new, independent life-space, in which I re-examine my connections to the place I can call "home". In the series of photos "The distinguishing" I traced the Orthodox world through my own eyes. That world promises purity, warm family feeling, spirituality, cleanness, continuity. My attempts to trace this world are completely subjective. Therefore, they are a predictable failure.

Fig. 23. Bas Jan Ader: *In Search of the Miraculous,* 1975. Photograph by Jan Verwoert. London: Afterall Books, 2006. Monoskop.

This image is taken from the work *In Search of the Miraculous*, by the Dutch-born artist Bas Jan Ader. It was intended to be a performance in three parts: in July 9, 1975, the 33-year-old artist set sail from Cape Cod on a solo voyage across the Atlantic. His boat, only a little over 12ft in length, was the smallest craft with which such a feat had ever been attempted. After three weeks at the sea, the radio contact was lost. Since then, Ader was never seen again. To this day, no one knows whether he was swept to his death by a

wave, whether he became disorientated and jumped overboard, or whether, from the very beginning, his intention in staging his last work had been to disappear or to run away - to escape (Dumbadze I20-I26).

I use this image since the artistic action of escaping can mean, in my eyes, many contradictory things. It can be a reaction to an event or situation, a bodily resistance or a repulsive reflex to an unwanted state. It can be seen as an act of liberation which creates a sense of freedom. It can reflect the unwillingness to confront or stand for something, the evading from duties or complete failure. It can be understood as an act of betrayal, a selfish abandonment or defeat. Is it possible at all to escape? While Ader's mysterious vanishing appears in my eyes like a fable, it represents the conclusion of a project which revolved around the risk of death, or the search for a deliberate failure. The idea behind Ader's search could be seen as the undertaking of a physical exercise, free from the safety of land, in order to access a spiritual bliss that might revive the romantic idea of survival in its purest sense. On the other hand, it could be understood as complete irresponsibility, as the death wish of an artist with no other aim than disappearance. The fact that Ader failed to complete the journey has little bearing on the success of a project which never depended on whether he would make it across the Atlantic, but on trying to make it. Ader's mother Johanna Adrianna Ader-Apples wrote the poem "From the Deep Waters of Sleep" on I2 October I975, after having, as she described it, a premonition of his death:

From the deep waters of sleep, I wake up to consciousness.
In the distance I hear a train rumbling in the early morning.
It is going East and passes the border. Then it will stop.
I feel my heart beating too. It will go on beating for some time.
Then it will stop.
I wonder if the little heart that has beaten with mine, has stopped.
When he passed the border of birth, I laid him at my breast,
Rocked him in my arms.
He was very small then.

A white body of a man, rocked in the arms of the waves,

Is very small too.

What are we in the infinity of ocean and sky?

A small baby at the breast of eternity.

Have you ever heard of happiness?

Springing from a deep well of sorrow?

Of love, springing from pain and despondency, agony and death?

Such is mine (qtd. in Dumbadze I32-I33).

February I5th [Night]

Do you understand me now?

Escaping has nothing to do with vanishing, disappearing, or moving to other places. It is about the act itself, taking the constant risk to fail, repeating the same mistakes over and over again, but never giving up.

Fig. 24. Ilya Kabakov: *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment,* I985. Installation mixed mediums. Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow. Art in America Magazine.

The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment by the Russian-American artist Ilya Kabakov is a good example of another kind of attempt to escape. It is an installation which presents a fictitious hero who did the impossible and flew into his own unknown cosmic space. The hero of this story had prepared his disappearance by using a makeshift slingshot. In the room he left some evidence and the plan for his machine. He had flown through the ceiling of his apartment leaving a great hole there. The viewer can only inspect the apartment from the outside, watching a scene that seems to have taken place just before his arrival.

The man living in the apartment had papered the walls with Soviet propaganda and posters, giving the place a strong "Soviet" feel. The traces he left behind in the room are a bed, a table scattered with drawings, a catapult and the hole in the ceiling through which bright light shines in. All the same, the hero of this installation did not appropriate and channel the energy in the way a proper cosmonaut should have done. He wasn't appointed by the state or by the society to embody the collective dream and to orbit the earth on behalf of his fellow citizens, representing in this way the society as a whole. According to Boris Groys, an artist is actually an illegitimate cosmonaut: He appropriates, privatizes and deploys global utopian energies entirely for his own ends, without previously having been selected and authorized by society "[...] This is where the dream of a global, cosmic, communist future has been purloined under cover of darkness, privatized and misused for one person's private, lonely ecstasy" (Groys 2006, 5-6).

You see, Kabakov escapes not only from the Soviet regime but also from himself, from being a former Soviet living in a capitalist country. As he attempts to escape into the unknown, he tries to evade his identity by abandoning the aesthetics of his childhood and his educational manners. The work is interesting, and the desperate attempt it presents, the pathetic effort to run away, causes empathy. Because the consequences of the attempt remain unknown, the act exposes its own absurdity. The consequence of Kabakov's flight is the sad result that remains hidden from the viewer. What remains evidential are both the traces and the comprehension concerning the impossibility of this action. Did he manage to escape with the help of his improvised instrumentation, or is it just a sham?

In fact, in my working process, the need to escape is neither the need to disappear nor to run away. What matters is the demonstration of the failure of this action. As in the works of Bas Jan Ader, Falling is Failing, the action itself really has no meaning, but it explicitly exhibits its own absurdity and futility. As Jan Tumlir said in "Bas Jan Ader" exhibition catalogue I999: "failure is so much more poignant, so much more successful, than success ever could be" (cit. in Kim-Cohen 7).

Fig. 25. I Amsterdam, 2008. Detail from performance documentation. Illustration by ME.

Letter 4: A beautiful Shelter

March I2th

Dear Mr. Research,

I've recently noticed that in order to write, I must make the effort of creating an "imaginary protection zone" for myself. It's a zone or place where I can manoeuvre freely and feel safe. I have found that I need to create, as part of my artistic escapism attitude (and not only in writing), such safe places, a kind of sanctuary zones. How does such a place look like, you may ask? It is not a closed place like a space surrounded by four walls or a fence. No, it's not a safe haven and no one is waiting for me there. On the contrary; it is a timeless and border-less zone. It has various background colours which slowly change, and a few horizons, all at the same time. In this kind of place, there is no smell in the air, and it doesn't have a taste. Instead, one can hear the constant sound of the wind. I dare to say: it is, objectively, a beautiful place,

surrounded by colours and shapes. It requires the dedication of the body and the mind. In this zone, the gravity is six times lower than normally. Therefore, being there feels unstable, but just for a while. I don't know exactly what is the cause of this.

An Outsider Artist or "Please come back home"

I believe that it is partly an "outsider artist behaviour": practising art outside the mainstream. A few people become professionals in producing images or spectacles, that is, artists in the modern Western sense. But there is also a group of creative people, a rich and varied group, who don't fit the official category of professional artists, however one likes to define it. At the best, they are the creative pattern-makers par excellence, often producing interesting and powerful works that find their way, through various means, into public view. Here, their artistic production takes on a life of its own, one that distances it — often even emphatically separates it — from its producer. This is the domain of Outsider Art. (Rhodes 7)

Am I an outsider artist? A safety zone can sometimes be produced by "repetitive actions". In my artistic practice, I often use repetitions which allow me to create a certain rhythm of writing or speaking. These acts are based on performative manoeuvres with a repetitive nature, such as automatic writing, systematic recitation of words or passages of speech, creating similar shapes and forms again and again. These are compulsive actions motivated by an urge, impulse or feeling leading to the loss of control and to a meditative state, allowing me to open myself to escapism or disengagement. These repetitions are taking place in the present, as part of artistic act, which is performed during an art making process. It is a specific moment in time, which allows, as meditation for instance, to dive into the act itself, and perhaps give an illusion of escaping. Moving from one place to another.

Gilles Deleuze refers to the notion of repetitions that accrue in present time, the effect of repeating consists within it, the past and the future too. In a passage in *Difference and Repetition,* Gilles Deleuze charcterizes repetition in terms of time that is empty and shows its close relationship with death instinct and narcissism (Deleuze I09-II4). This level of repetition refers to an ultimate event. A powerful act that becomes timeless by its own nature. What does it mean? It means that by performing these kind of repetitive actions in my work, the "me" and the "I" give way to "the man without name, without family, without qualities, without self", the Self gives way to "the Already-Overman whose scattered members gravitate around the sublime image" (90). I came across this image as I browsed through the internet for "performative repetitive forms of art".

Fig. 26. Emma Hauck: Untitled (Letters to Husband - "komm, komm" and "Herzensschatzi komm"). n.d. The Prinzhorn Collection Museum, Heidelberg. Sammlung Prinzhorn.

It is a letter, which belongs to a woman called Emma Hauck (1878-1920). The story behind the letter reveals the amazing biography of the young woman from one hundred years ago. Emma lived in Southern Germany where she was involuntary hospitalized at the Psychiatric University Clinic in Heidelberg. According to the family records, she was suffering from a severe mental disturbance, and at the time of her restraint she believed she had been contaminated or poisoned by her husband's kiss. After several months of hospitalization, she was diagnosed with Dementia Praecox and sent to an asylum for the incurable in Wiesloch, where she passed away eleven years later at the age of forty-two.

During this period, Emma wrote expressive and emotional letters to her husband Michael, who was a schoolteacher in Mannheim. In every single letter, she begged him to come back and bring her home. From the I2 letters found, a few were fairly readable. We can learn from them that she longed to see her family and her children and to return back home. In some of the letters she expresses her wish to visit a theatre, to eat a good piece of cake and to enjoy a glass of red wine. However, according to the medical notes, Hauck's behaviour did not reflect such wishes. Her wish to live the traditional life of a housewife was undermined by her deep and pathological aversion to the family. There are other and even more interesting letters, dramatically less legible, where she overwrites the text with several layers of repetitive writing. (Argyle, n.pag.)

I am not wishing to create a psychological analysis. I'm interested in cases in which the society can consider the artist an outcast, a non-functional person who cannot truly maintain a "healthy" life routine. In such situations, I believe, there is a necessity of escaping, whether it is someone's escape into the real world or an escape from the society which excludes the figure of the artist. As part of my work, I find myself plunging time and again into doubtful places, where there is only a thin line between reality and imagination. It's a kind of a psychotic state supposedly under control. It seems that sometimes, in order to create art, one must know how to enter these psychotic situations and then emerge from them without the risk of becoming mad. The question is, what kind of aesthetics characterizes such action? In this case, repetitive writing follows destructive lines, as the target of destruction is what has been carefully ordered. The aimed result of the action is the destruction of such a care, its obliteration. Such care then becomes lost. (Raaijmakers I5.)

In the letter attached here, Emma displays two different types of handwriting. On the left side she has carefully written down her husband's name and address, together with the date. On the right side, she has covered the entire area with pencil strokes of mechanical repetitions, repeating the German word *Komm* ("Come"). The words become reflective lines of registration and they produce an image like those of a heart monitor or a lie detector. In the third letter written at the beginning of her incarceration she writes *Herzenschatzi Komm* ("Heart's treasure or Sweetheart come") - in capital letters. This time the text is written in columns or large fingers that run down the page, probably repeating the nicknames Bartli and Schatzi. They vary in density and are partly readable only at the edges where the overlapping decreases. Within the columns, the lettering follows the peaks and troughs of a landscape. (Argyle n.pag.) I'm not suggesting that the letters are works of art, and Emma was probably not aware of her action. For the viewer, the images seem to evidence an action which can be interpreted as obsessive. Repetitive action has created here an emotional-abstract landscape which gains its meaning from the action itself. With respect to artistic practice, in repetitive action the choices may form an "escapist visibility". Such an action may bring the artist into a meditative state, psychosis or loss of control, but because it is not functional it can also be understood, by the society, as destructive in its nature. Repetitive action works against practical logic or common sense. It is intuitive and uncontrollable in terms of knowing how it's going to be completed. Such a loss of control, defying functional social order, can be interpreted as a threat or as a rebellion. The loss of control brought the artist into the place of truth.

Escapism is beautiful. Emma's destructive way of writing forms fascinating and heart breaking forms of visibility. Her motivation and desire is clear to me. She repeats actions of automatic but intimate writing in the form letters - begging, asking and hoping - to to be taken back home, to "normality", or to a place that doesn't really exist. She is addressing the one who left her, a man who is maybe responsible for her imprisonment, asking him to come back and set her free. The graphic repetition created here has a great sense of beauty, reflected in the outcomes of her romantic story and it's ironic and sad meanings. The fact that she is not aware of her action is a beautiful, evidential document, one which tells about her true attempt to escape to a better place. For me, such an act of writing is dual; it contains both an act of creation and one of deletion working simultaneously. While writing the same words over and over again, she creates open fields, deep forests and endless expanses, looking for another world to long for. On the other hand, a letter can be seen as a blocking screen, a hedge of thorns, which may not allow any passage. Her letters offer the dual visibility of meditative landscapes. I want to refer to Rothko's paintings, for example:

Fig. 27. Mark Rothko: Gray in Yellow, 1960.

Creating an experience of almost complete blindness, of graphic surface filled with a content blocking the vision. The result is a place used as a "city of refuge" for its creator. Rothko's painting, like Emma's letters, allows the artist to create a window through which one can leave. I'll write more about beauty in my next letter.

Ps. It is important to note that Emma's letters never reached their destination, and that the addressee was not able to see them. I think her motivation to escape is a much more significant fact than the final visual product. The final (artistic) product of escapist

tactics might function as a visual evidence for the motivation to run away or to come back home. This duality is part of the escapist approach. Regardless of whether Emma was aware of the intriguing visually of her letters or not, I find great beauty in them, beauty that derives from her escapist approach, which reflects the state of imprisonment and the strong desire to brake free.

I attach here a photo from a work called *"My ghetto"* (2010). My working room was covered from the inside, during one year, by thousands of 'flowers pictures' creating a defensive illusionary shield from the outside world. It was a beautiful shelter. I will refer to this work more in details in my future letters.

Fig. 28. Beautiful photos of flowers, Detail from *My Ghetto*, 2010. Illustration by ME.

March 15th

My dear research, how escapism is related to "beauty"?

Beautiful: "having beauty; possessing qualities that give great pleasure or satisfaction to see, hear, think about, etc.; delighting the senses or mind." (Dictionary.com. n.pag)

Eric Newton writes in his book *The Meaning of Beauty*: "[…] the study of beauty in Nature involves the study of function - or at least a realization that the natural beauty is a by-product of function. Whereas the study of beauty in art involves no such thing. What causes the artist to extract a fragment of the universal pattern is his love of the pattern" (Newton 27). Relating to Emma's letters as vivid evidence for the repetitive-

destructive action, I would like to focus on these actions, on their central value in producing "beautiful images". Let me explain what I mean. I believe that the sense of beauty can constitute a means for escapism. It is a subjective notion which can be interpreted in many ways, but the common ground for all is that beauty draws the viewer to happiness. A good example is the working process of the artist Hans-Peter Feldmann. His approach to art-making can be characterized as an obsessive passion for collecting, ordering and re-presenting worn out images and clichés, reproductions of reproductions, everyday graphics, souvenirs, toys and trivial mass media imagery with individual sentiments. The collecting and reorganizing concern authenticity, sentimentality and loss of uniqueness. His works are full with (self) irony, as with someone who knows that his habits are bad but still cannot stop maintaining them.

Fig. 29 Hans-Peter Feldmann: *Flower No. 4*, 2009.

Feldmann makes great use of banal and daily life imagery, pointing at its uniqueness and impersonal character at the same time. Producing and displaying such collections, composed of worn public imagery, he creates, in my view, great surfaces with beautiful, attractive and nostalgic colours and shapes. His motivation to collect, classify and put in order emerges from great fascination for beauty and for clean or controlled forms. Reordering public imagery into new compositions can bring forth a sense of security and calmness in a chaotic world, but it can also reflect the personal need to possess these images, as if a private treasure. By collecting and presenting them in different orders he reveals an outline of the aesthetics of the masses, which represents the functionality of daily life (the way people develop intimate sentiments into mass production objects). In other words, it purports to show how "love and desire" should look like. While in Emma's letters we can experience total performative actions of automatic writing, covering the page with shapes and colours, Feldmann's escapist tactics is expressed in the obsessive need to collect, to

fill empty spaces with imagery, and to put things into order. In both cases, the visual outcomes of these "artistic" actions show beautiful imagery and deal with beauty as a means to reach somewhere.

Likewise, in both cases, it is not clear whether there is any artistic value to these activities. We can read from an interview with Feldmann: "Feldmann insists that he's not an artist. He dislikes such labels because for him the so called 'Art' is simply part of the everyday life, nothing more, nothing less […] He started cutting and collecting pictures from books and magazines at the age of five. During the last 65 years, the practice of collecting, cataloguing and rearranging images has never ceased. It's a habit and a need as well […] Feldmann insists once again that he's not an artist and that his exhibitions are not an art exhibition. He is just a person who loves pictures." (Ting n.pag.) We simply have to look at his pictures to hear the music.

I keep on saying to my students, that Artists are people who cannot do anything properly. Art making is and will always be a by-product of the society. Art will always remain on the margins of society in order to subvert the social order and to point out its illnesses, or to dismantle it from the ground up. The artistic act, as I see it in my work, must have a destructive core in order to function as a critical tool. In his essay "The Destructive Character", Walter Benjamin refers to the étui-man, The Organizer, as the opposite of what he calls "destructive character" (Benjamin 542). It is a character which maintains a constant order until the destroyer comes to fulfil his mission. In some sense, both characters depend on each other: the destroyer needs to keep on destroying, while the organizer keeps on organizing. Similarly, the escapist artist is depended on the confines he is trying to escape form. As I see it, the involuntary action, as artistic action, must be done in order to expose its own un-meaning. The 'music' of organizing in the case of Feldmann is a desire of or fascination for beauty, but also a critical and essential tool of escapism. Through such fascination one can create a "toolbox" serving escapist artistic tactics. For an artist who chooses to deal with social or political issues through an escapist approach, beauty, as an object of desire, allows both visually and conceptually for a variety of mechanisms of repression and denial. Beauty serves as an artistic behavioural tool for creating escapist tactics. When dealing with reality through fascinated gaze and forms of beauty, the artist can create parallel worlds or fantasies that enable him to face reality by artistic escapist means.

March I7th [Night]

I'm writing this letter in a waiting room of a hospital in Israel. Here, the waiting time is very long, and the place looks poor, messy, run-down, dirty and extremely depressing. The rhythm of the respirator dictates the breathing rhythm of the people waiting in the room. Ironically, someone in the department management has decided to "add some colour" on the walls through printed canvases depicting distant landscapes.

Fig. 30-32. In the Hospital's Waiting Room, Tel Aviv. Illustrations by ME, 2014.

Crispin Sartwell writes in his book *Six Names of Beauty to Monet's Water Lilies* made in the early twentieth century: "At this point, reproductions of these paintings adorn countless McDonalds and Holiday Inns; They have come to seem as trivial and unchallenging in their beauty as any work of art can be. But if you can recover the paintings from the vulgarization of their repetitions, you will remember that they are beautiful" (Startwell 15).

Fig. 33. Claude Monet: Detail from: *Reflections of Clouds on the Water-Lily Pond*. 1920-1926

What is the value of beauty in relation to escapism?

Relating to the sense of beauty as an escapist approach, I should not base my ideas only on the individual aesthetic pleasure or fascination, but also on the phenomenological traditions dealing with the place of art in our society.

The images on the walls were taken from an Image Bank and printed on a large-scale canvases distributed randomly in the corridors of the department. The aim was to "bring in some colour and life, and to divert the patients' attention from the hardships of reality", as one of the nurses told me. Besides the decorative function of these pictures, a prolonged viewing of any of the images attempts to send the viewer, even if just for a moment, into the snow-capped mountains and lush fields, into distant memories and forgotten hopes. The person who installed these pictures in the hospital intended to manipulate the viewer through their aesthetic qualities, asking the viewer to participate in the experience of escapism - an escape into a better place and a better time. For a critical eye, these reproductions on the wall have the reversed effect. They underscore the wretchedness of the milieu and the impossibility of such images in a place like this. Still, for the patients, doctors and people waiting, it doesn't really matter. Beauty is working here as a perfect escapist tool, as a mechanism of anaesthesia. It relies on distant fantasies, unreal hopes and dreams. Like a sugar addict I find myself diving into the colourful and joyful pictures on the hospital wall, allowing myself to blend with the poor and sad illusion which works like an open window leading to a better place. It gives me a glimpse of joy, like a quick relief. The relation between these two realities is ironic and very beautiful. In his essay, "The Relevance of the Beautiful", Hans-Georg

Gadamer claims that "the experience of the beautiful, and particularly the beautiful in art, is the innovation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be found" (Gadamer 32). He implies that aesthetic perception does not reside in the individual, but is part of something larger, is rooted in the relation between the individual and the society we live in. This is why any shift in the way in which the individual relates himself to the society effects aesthetic perception. The theme of beauty bothers me, because I find that in my works it is often an issue, a component which allows me to keep my distance from the subject I deal with. For example, in my video installation *My Ghetto*, I could not produce any images related to the Holocaust. I didn't feel it legitimate, as an artist, to deal with such a theme with artistic tools. Eventually, I took pictures of flowers. Beautiful generic images of flowers, lacking of personality, which turned from the decorative wallpaper in the studio to a protective shield.

Fig. 34. Detail from *My Ghetto*, 2010,.Video installation, Amsterdam. Illustration by ME.

Using one's ability to create beauty allows one to create, at the same time, remoteness, denial and especially a sense of security - a beautiful shelter. In the eyes of the viewer, the flowers on the wall can be captured as an artistic failure. The artist was unable to deal with the Holocaust, so he decorated the entire room with beautiful and empty images. How are these flowers connected to the Holocaust? This "failure" has created the escapist effect. It creates a nest of colours, 'positive thoughts', preventing the sight from the real world outside. At the same time, it also affects the viewer as it protects them from dealing with the 'real thing'that art should deal with, inviting them to take part in the escapist act. But mostly it exposes the weakness of the artist and of art to deal with historical or political issues face to face. This is not a game.

Gadamer refers to *Spiel*, play and game, pointing out the relationship between aesthetic perception and the way it affects the connection between the individuals and the society they live in. It is a communicative act with a special feature: in play there are no passive viewers. A play in a play and in a game, the participants are taking active parts by watching or playing according to the dictation of the rules. An artwork that is functioning as a living testimony of the artist's actions, is inviting the viewer to play its game and maybe to collaborate with wrong and shamful actions that the artist has done to himself. The inability or the fear to deal with reality through artistic means is creating shameful or disappointing situations of escapism, which are then presented in a beautiful forms shapes and colours.

I conclude that an escapist approach is not reducible to an artist's individual situation, it is contingently structured communication between the artist and the public. When an artist chooses to deal with reality with the artistic tools of escapist tactics, this requires that the viewer is motivated to take actively part, so that the artist must ask the viewer to approve of his will to escape. Therefore, artistic escapist action cannot take place without someone constantly knowing about these attempts and taking actively part in them.

Making art as a shelter

The Israeli artist Noa Sadka, is an artist who deals with reality using actions of seclusions. She shuts herself in all kinds of spaces, for different periods of time, there she maintains her 'life as an artist'. After the period of seclusion, the evidence of her existence, the residues that she left behind as traces deeds, are presented as the exhibition or artistic outcomes.

In her declaration of the artist she writes: "A Seclusion can be a room in my house, balcony, refuge space, gallery or a museum field area, just a place that I could breathe okay, that has air. Time of a seclusion: a few hours to three days. During my Insularity I bring with me things (objects) such as bandages, wires, creams, surgical tape, pencil, glue, small pieces of cloth, sleeping bag, bucket, tubes, instrument Ventolin, photographs and objects that been left from previews seclusions. In every seclusion, I am bounding myself into a specific and measured space, where I'm allowed to be at. I'm not doing it with any pathos or heroic intentions, such as Marina Abramovic for instance. There is no meditative motivation behind that, or any sacred will for 'self- convergence'." (Sadka,

Artist's declaration, 20II)

Sadka is known of her work as a photographer. A woman with a camera, facing reality and documenting it. When she was asked why she need the seclusions, she said:

"once I said and felt that photography is giving me the notion of reality. But the tree that stood in front of me and the tree I took a picture of are completely different. In my seclusions I am asking to reduce this gap between me and reality. I'm asking to make my encounters with reality more concrete, specific, normal. Without trying to be artistic. This is the art I can make. (I'm a very limited artist). I do not wish to respond to a space, but I just live there. This is elementary for me, not poetic." (Sadka, Artist's declaration, 20II)
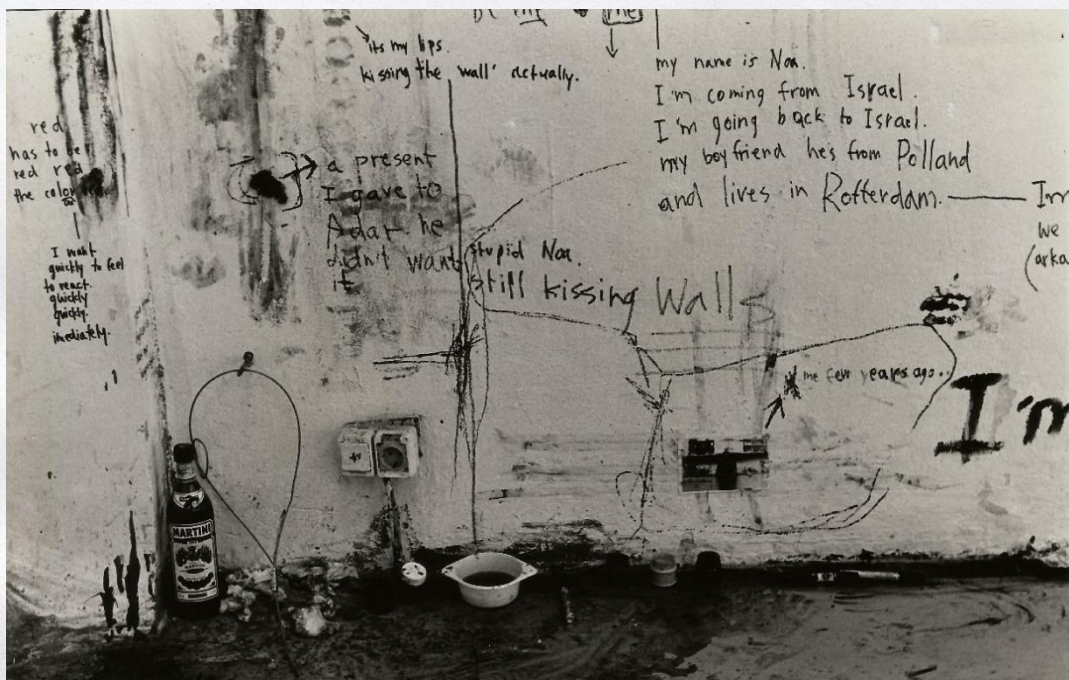
Fig. 35 Noa Sadka, seclusion no.I, Amsterdam I999.
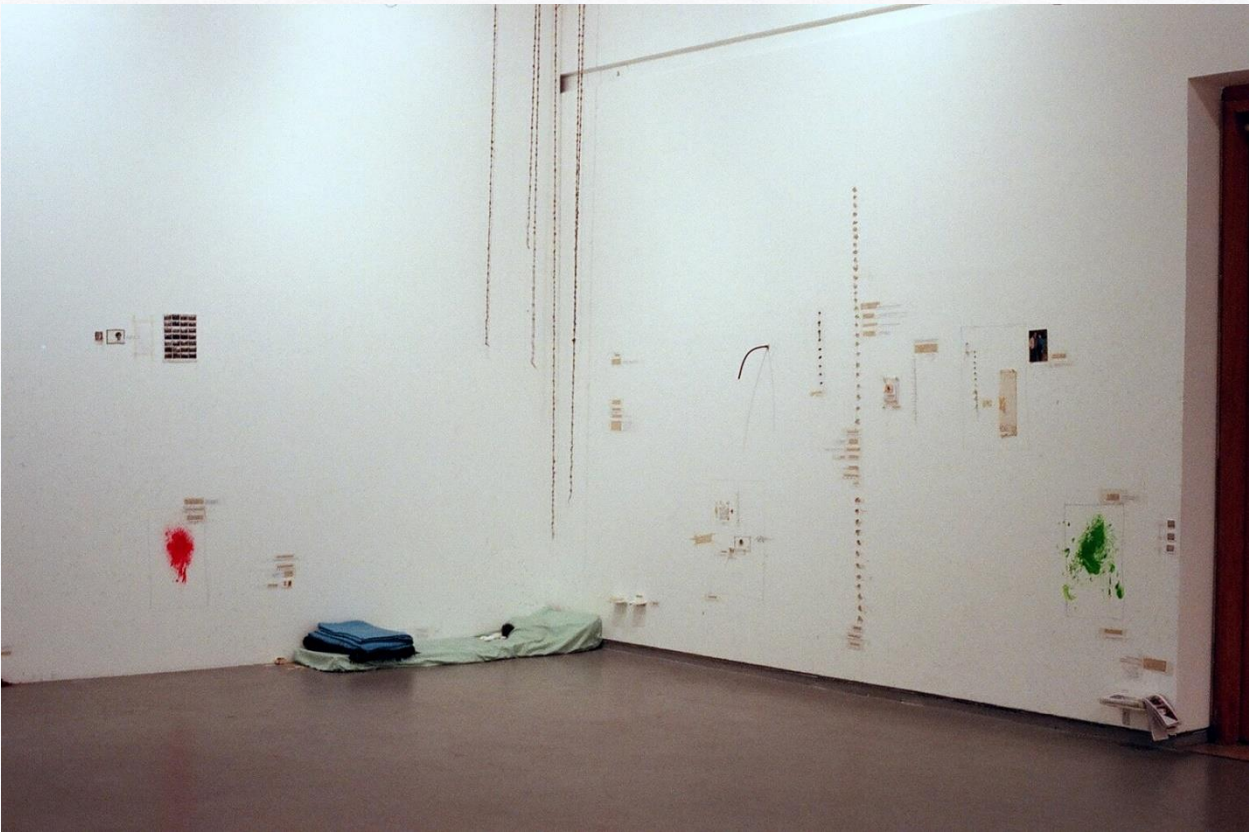
Fig.36 Noa Sadka , seclusion no.9., Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel 2012.

Letter 5: Trying to kill art

April 10th

Dear Mr. Research,

I have been very confused lately, since questions about value keep on bothering me. I don't ask, why am I an escapist artist, but how can I, as such an artist, create significant art? What is the real value of the works I make? Please don't get me wrong. I don't complain, and these questions are not the sign of self-nullification. I ask myself these questions in relation to the reality in which I live today, and I try to examine what might be the best possibilities, under these circumstances, for making art.

How to make significant Art?

For me, the Israeli reality dictates a clear standard of pathos, heroism and nationalism in art. Clearly, there are all kinds of attitudes in art, and no one really compels me to accept the rules of "proper art making". As an Israeli artist I feel an obligation to follow nationalistic conception. As mentioned before, I was educated to create "meaningful

art" by using social codes of national symbolism, sometimes in dramatic or didactic ways. Dealing with national issues such as the Holocaust or the occupation immediately reflects my identity as an Israeli Artist. My own preoccupation with reluctant and "disabled art", my refusal to cooperate with these aspirations, makes of me a traitor or a failing artist.

Waldemar George speaks of compulsive relation when questioning nationality as Nomadism. Nomadism is a constitutive condition of the poetics of the Jewish Art. Thought Nomadism it maintains its obsessive occupation with efforts to remain nationalistic. The truth is that a wandering nation that has passed through different cultures over its history and yet managed to maintain its national identity has the tendency to Judaize the forms and shapes it uses, in order to adapt them to its own poetic expression. This way the problem will remain as it only changes its form. (George 2I). In my own generation, there are several prominent Israeli artists who deal directly with national, historical or Zionist issues (Yael Bartana, Sigalit Landau). One of the most active young artists in the Israeli art scene today is Erez Israeli, whose artistic practice is based on a direct approach to questions about Jewish identity. He knows very well the local and Israeli issues (war, Holocaust, military, occupation, collective memory). He told in an interview: "And I take my work very seriously… It sounds very heroic, but we live in Israel and not in Berlin. I try to deal with what is here. Personally, I'm interested in places of death, remembrance and commemoration. I'm trying to figure out why". (Ayger n.pag.)

Fig.37. Erez Israeli: *Before and After*, 2008. Photograph, 60 x 50 cm. Nrg.

In my opinion, Israeli is a prototypical example of an "Israeli artist". Here, my intention is to simulate the generic character of an artist deeply committed to his nation and, through that, to address the national issues as questions about place and identity. The politicization of the urge to be part of a place and to share an identity is one of the main factors when one becomes engaged in these questions. The common denominator for me and Israeli is that we are both "products" of the Israeli situation. Each of us has chosen to engage in the same issues but with diametrically opposed approaches: Erez, like

many other successful artists, is willing to deal with sensitive socio-political and historical materials with "bare hands", to permanently situate and demarcate the boundaries of identity: "I am a Jew, I am from Israel". By identifying himself as an "Israeli-Jewish Artist", he allows himself to investigate sensitive social issues through illustrative or manipulative artistic manoeuvres, provoking questions about contemporary Jewish identity. This attitude and the motivations begin it is problematic. Like many other artists, Israeli truly believes in the power and legitimacy of art to reflect on these issues and to deal with them. These artists believe that they have, as artists, the right and the obligation to engage in such issues through artistic means. By doing so, they recharge their artistic work with significance. One may say: He is an artist who deals with such matters, so he is probably an artist who cares. Therefore, most of these artistic pretensions have ended in illustrative national symbols and clichéd presentations. Does art have the ability to address these issues without becoming a decorative product?

In my case, that question has incited me to develop an escapist artistic attitude, one which reaches for the real ability of art to address these matters. I can see myself as a victim/product of the system, as an artist with a different approach, having a negative and opposed motivation for working directly with nationalistic symbols. Perhaps I can call it anti-artistic involvement. This behaviour has taken various forms which all originate in my unwillingness to cooperate. It is an approach based on refusal toward art making and on scepticism about the power and meaning of the artistic action. As Houdini tried to break free from the chains and locks, so I want to break free from "meaningful art". In relation to that, the manifesto of the Fluxus group from 1963 is relevant for me.

Fig. 38. George Maciunas: The Fluxus Manifesto, I963. George Maciunas Foundation Inc.

Maciunas's Manifesto (I963) alternates dictionary definitions of "flux" with a handwritten text: "Purge the world of [...] culture […] dead art [...] abstract art, illusionistic art [...] ". It goes on to advocate "NON ART REALITY." (Maciunas qut. in Phillpot n.pag.) In his manifesto, Maciunas did not only focus on the motivation for blurring the distinction between art and life, he also wished to help everybody through art by directing their attention to life. The main idea was not to produce elevating and "artistic" products, but to focus on the experience and notions which followed from the art making process. "Fluxus people must obtain their 'art' experience from everyday experiences, eating, working, etc." Maciunas stands for diverting human resources to "socially constructive ends". (Phillpot n.pag.) The Manifesto of Fluxus seeks to dismantle the heroic and symbolic presence of the work of art. In fact, Fluxus declared the attempt to "kill art". By producing "meaningless" objects - negligible or disconnected from their functional context - and unclear performances and art works, they offered a completely free and independent practice based on real-life experiences. "'Fluxus is definitely against [the] art-object as [a] non-functional commodity—to be sold and to make [a] livelihood for an artist.' But Maciunas concedes that the art-object 'could temporarily have the pedagogical function of teaching people the needlessness of art'" (Phillpot n.pag.).

IIth April

Anti-art! - Anti Artist!

When I arrived to the residency program at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, I immediately understood that something is going wrong. I asked myself why am I so bothered with my locality and identity. Most of the artist colleagues I met in the program were very concerned with "artistic" issues like colour, composition and shape. Most of their reflections concerned colours, brush strokes or how to capture a momentary perception. To me, it all seemed to be a waste of time. I didn't find my place there and had doubts about my role as an artist. I felt that I didn't I belong to the group of artists whose aim is to produce art. I didn't and I still don't believe in the power of art to create necessary images. Art seems to have the tendency to produce ever more images which are no longer needed. My studio has become an artistic terror-cell. The residence program develops expectations for its invitees to create art and to glorify the studio they have received. I could not make art. During the whole year, I spent my time sitting in safe and closed places, sealed rooms, far away from any interaction with artistic production. This lead to the creation of a work I mentioned before: "My Ghetto". I don't want to discuss directly the development of this project, but I need to indicate, with this example, the behaviour in which the question of my role as an artist becomes manifest. The only thing I did was talking to my video camera for hours, telling about my imaginary adventures I had experienced in My Ghetto. The sound of my mumbling voice in the room gave the impression that the evidence was all false and made up, revealing only the rich subconscious of an unreliable or traumatized person. I created this work after experiencing that, as an artist, I have neither the tools nor the right to deal with issues such as Holocaust. Who am I to address such matters? Have I ever been there? Have I ever experienced hunger or pain?

Any artistic attempt or outcome will immediately turn into a pale illustrative exercise, motivated by the wish to touch the untouchable. During the same time that I made the video documentation, the only visual imagery I could produce (in order to fulfil the expectations for me as a visual artist) were pictures of flowers: beautiful, colourful flowers that gradually covered the walls of my studio.

Fig. 39. Detail from *My Ghetto*, 2010. Video installation. Illustration by ME.

The main act taking place here is "vomiting memories". It is an attempt to exhaust the contents contrasting with my identity: fears, personal-collective memories.

…With a nose like mine, and a tail behind

From the sunlight, I was looking for a shelter,

This was my ghetto.

Bitter ghetto, sweet ghetto,

Hateful Ghetto, beloved Ghetto

A Ghetto which I went from in order to return... (Levin 73-74)

With this installation, I created an imaginary, safe and colourful place for my post-traumatic character, a victim of his own, forced identity. It was a flowery shelter, where I could escape from my real self, or erase it, in favour of a fake one. The performative act of talking non-stop to the camera was, among other things, an attempt for cleansing, for the purification of the body and the soul. The reported action alienated the content I spoke about. It confused people as they were wondering whether I speak the truth or make things up. (Under these circumstances, it was the only way to survive as an artist.)

Fig. 40. Detail from *My Ghetto,* 2010. Illustration by ME.

April 12th

An artist is only an artist.

Once I met a Serbian artist and showed her my works. She was shocked by the fact that I was an artist from Israel not willing to "take actively part" in the political conflict. She asked me scornfully: "Don't you care?" She was overwhelmed by my resistance to taking any social responsibility. I tried to explain her that today artists have no tools and even less the authority to deal with such matters. "An artist is only an artist", I said. I have to admit that together with my self-righteous and withdrawn attitude toward art I was also feeling guilty, asking myself if I should try to change - maybe I should still believe in the power of art and not engage all the time in efforts to "kill the author". In his essay "The Death of the Author", Roland Barthes asks the reader to ignore the author's private life and to detach it from his text in order to understand the latter independently. He seeks to make a clear distinction between the written text and the author's personal identity. He asks the reader to ignore the author's political views, historical context, religion, ethnicity, psychology or other biographical or personal attributes in order to reach the significance of the work. "To give the text an Author and assign a single, corresponding interpretation to it is to impose a limit on it [...]" (Barthes 147) To ignore the author's private life is to create a sterilized text, cleaned from any personal point of view, and therefore possibly a "convenience zone" which the author and the reader can share, avoiding however any emotional meeting. For me, it feels more like a one-night stand than a long term relationship. Both the reader and the author avoid getting involved with each other's' lives. For Barthes, there is no father or mother to the text anymore which therefore keeps on floating in an empty world of disengagement.

Therefore, it keeps both the writer and the reader very lonely.

Barthes' suggestions can be absorbed and understood in other ways:

He not only separates the text from the author denying the ownership, he also makes the literary text into an object which by its very nature is opposed to any authority and ownership. An Escapist text which refuses the very principle of ownership as well as the idea and significance of Western culture and capitalist ideology, and essentially becomes a defaulter, a metaphor for disobedience. This kind of an anti-art motivated approach, one which doesn't seem to offer any clear significance for artistic products, in fact becomes meaningful only through its recalcitrant nature and its power to resist compliance. The recognition of art's inability to deal with reality is its point of power. My own suggestion is to keep the writer (artist) and the viewer alive, and to try with all means to kill the art work itself.

April I5th [Afternoon]

"Art Never Dies"

War is here again. Sirens, bombing, shelling, screaming. I open the Facebook. Bleeding children, amputees, crying mothers, sirens. I close the Facebook. I try to keep myself busy with other things which might distract me. My highlight of the day: cleaning the house, watching TV while eating, going to the supermarket. This morning I took a picture of me queuing in the supermarket.

Fig. 4I. Queuing in the supermarket, 20I5. Illustration by ME.

An old woman was standing behind me, she didn't speak any Hebrew.

I wanted to give way to her, but she insisted on standing in line. An order is an order, she said (in Russian). I feel guilty when I am not prepared to deal with graphic images of

the disasters. In Facebook, a friend of mine posted uncensored images of dead bodies, ruined homes, pornographic images of bloodshed. I couldn't watch it.

As an exercise, I force myself to "make art in times of war or under conditions of war". "I find myself composing 3D images of fruits with the help of an animation software". I publish those images in Facebook next to my friend's horror pictures. Not getting as many Likes as she did. I receive one response: "Are these War Machines"?

Fig 42. 3D's Pickle, 2014. Illustration by ME.

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag asks questions like: Is the viewer's perception of reality eroded by the daily barrage of horror images? What does it mean to care about the suffering of people in conflict zones faraway? What about the indifference of the photographer / artist himself in relation to reality? Could it be that an escapist artist is "suffering" from apathy towards reality? Is it possible that avoidance and hiding behind "other images" is the only way to cope with the horrors and to survive?

Setting aside the sympathy we have for others beset by war and murderous politics and engaging in a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, may - in ways we might prefer not to imagine - be linked to their suffering, just as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others. Recognizing this is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark. (Sontag 102-103)

In order to define the term disabled art, and to explain why I consider art to be disabled, I first had to define what it means for art "to be able". I couldn't do it in the beginning by telling you about my resistance to the usual productive nature of art and artists. Through the time of writing, I realized that, in art, "to be able to" refers to

everything that is moved by the clear and pure motivation to create visibility. It is a healthy (?) drive of artists to use artistic language and tools in order to behave in the world and to pose questions about the edges of the medium. It is a vivid zone which promotes expression and freedom and communicates within its own environment through a dynamic self-revival. In other words, as the cliché says: "Art never dies". I've decided to investigate the idea of disabled art through questions like: What happens to art when the artist tries to kill it? How is the role of art today, in relation to political-social events, served by anti-artistic motivations, dis-functionality, destructiveness, tiredness, self-silencing or disappearance, encouragement in failure and unwillingness to "deliver the goods"? Finally, I was interested in defining visual outcomes that could legitimize this kind of art. Over time, I realized that my escapist artistic reaction concerns not a temporary disability. Disabled art doesn't aim to demonstrate virtuosity, fascination or glorification of its outcomes. It is an art the products and motives of which are not really viable. This happens when the artist clearly realizes that his artistic production has no meaning. When he does not believe any more in the power of art to handle impossible reality. The creative process is based mainly on encouraging disintegration, loss of control, the failure of coherent or functional performance.

Fig. 43. Francisco Goya: *The Third of May,* I808. Oil on Canvas, 8' 9" x I3' 4". Museo del Prado, Madrid. KhanAcademy.

The central figure in the painting *The Third of May* is a poor labourer playing the role of the crucified Christ. The only source of light in the painting, situated between him and the firing squad, illuminates his body and fills it with spiritual, holy light. Goya's painting, in contrast to the French painting's heroic attitude, presents the victim as an

anti-hero. The main figure is not a winning hero who is dying in a battle, but rather someone being killed on the side of the road like an animal. Both the landscape and the men's dresses are lacking any uniqueness, making the depicted act both routine and timeless.

Therefore, Disabled Art requires in its essence a clear, repetitive act of "execution": a metaphorical execution of the social values often covered by the role of the artist in the society.

There is no holiness, nothing stable and politically correct. An escapist artist who uses disabled art as a strategy points specifically at the anti-heroic figure of the broken artist, the scared and intimidated, marked by tiredness and helplessness. Without any fear of the consequences, the escapist artist does not believe in the power of art. His work is based on the inability of art to cope with reality or to reflect on it. The artistic quality of his work is defined by a resistance state of mind. This produces a new artistic space of creative freedom and independence; when dealing with reality, he can often be critical and effective.

The execution is inevitable. It is a positive event, a happy one; it wishes to celebrate the inability of art and the anti-motivation with respect to all success like creating artistic statements, being interesting or showing excellence. The power of this kind of art appears in avoidance techniques; therefore, an escapist artist realizes executions on a regular basis, as a daily routine.

Letter 6: The Shadow of the Artist.

April 18

Dear Mr. Research,

A few months ago, I came across a new book about Walter Benjamin's private life entitled *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Eiland and Jennings, 2014). I find it presents the relations between his daily routine and his writing in a quite interesting way. The book describes how various factors of his life are reflected in his writings: falling in love, personal wishes, relationships, and the special connection he had with his only child. The descriptions reveal an escapist outline and a tendency to failure, disappointment or defeat. Benjamin took advantage of his parents and two brothers, both economically and emotionally. His relation to his only son was ambivalent and moved between love and

neglect. For days he did not leave his house, looking for foreign life in hiding places. In his picture you can see a leaned and stooped person, deeply immersed in his own world, his hair matted and pulled, his face serious and tiered. His shadow is narrow and limited, amazingly pushed underneath his arms and books, hidden but safe.

When I teach photography or art, it is very important for me to show, besides the artist's work, a picture of his face and body. From the picture of the artist we can learn a lot about his life: how he liked to be dressed and where he liked to be photographed. The picture reduces our tendency to glorify the artist, to make him a star or a conceptual idea. Likewise, in my view it is important to focus, in the photo, on the shape of the shadow cast by the artist's figure. I believe we can learn a lot about a person from the way he treats his shadow. The shadow following a person can be considered a by-product of his body or maybe the confirmation of his existence in the world. The sayings "being afraid of one's own shadow" and "trying to escape from one's own shadow" refer, in this case, to what can define my character as an escapist artist.

I refer here to the notion of the shadow as an allegory of the cultural-historical and political burden that follows my character. The shadow is a reflection of the mannerism and obsession with questions of identity that manifests itself as my escapist artist's alter ego. The outline of the body and its shadow are changing, creating sometimes a deceptive mix.

Fig 44. Gisele Freund: *Walter Benjamin in the Bibiothèque National in Paris,* 1937.

I find Benjamin's text "The Destructive Character" very interesting; it can be read as a reflection on the escapist artist's shadow. The complex relations between the body and its

shadow are based, in this case, on maintaining a balance between destruction and reconstruction. In the essay Benjamin refers to a character who is motivated to make changes by destroying things. "The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away […] The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destroying rejuvenates, because it clears away the traces of our own age […]" (Benjamin 54I).

In its destructive form, the shadow can symbolize the cultural-historical burden to which the author is subjected. Any attempt to escape or avoid it may lead to escapist actions designed for a predictable failure.

Rudolf Schwarzkogler was an Austrian performance artist associated with the Viennese Actionist group that included the artists Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, and Hermann Nitsch. He is known of his extreme attitude in art making, walking the fine line between life and death, presenting painful material of sadistic acts or of a pretended self-sacrifice. His photographs are presenting brutal self-sadism action which he used to call: "Aktionen". In these actions he imitated dead fish or chicken, wounded and suffering body, rapped in gauzes, deliberate self-harm Martyrized actions. He created images of extreme human suffering, confronting the viewer without barriers to manipulation of self-destruction, controlling the viewers by his own egocentric pain, sharing his own hell with others. In these cases, it is difficult to make a distinction between lucidity and madness. What is the authenticity level of these actions, in regard to escapist motivation?
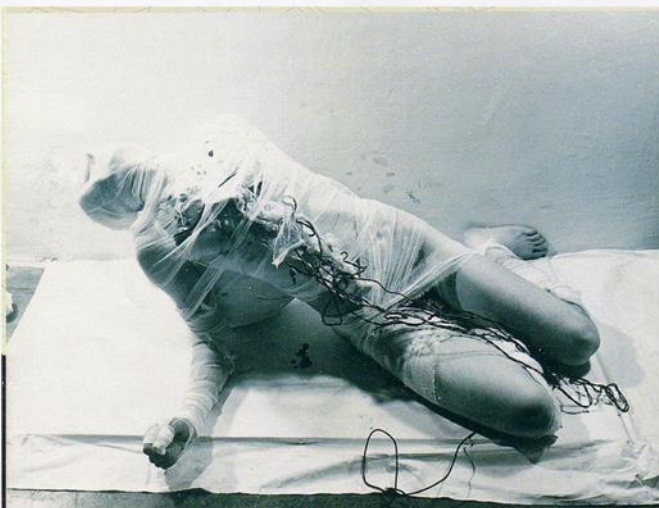
Fig. 45. Rudolf Schwarzkogler: *3 Aktion*,I965.

Why did he do it?

Benjamin's destructive character, whose existence depends on countering, indicates in the essay its opposite character: the organizer (the étuiman): "The destructive character is the enemy of the étui-man. The étuiman looks for comfort, and the case is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvet-lined trace that he has imprinted on the world. The destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction [...]" (Benjamin p.54I)

The "organizing body" in relation the destructive, can be translated to the relationship between the physical body with its shadow. They are never separate, although sometimes the physical body makes attempts to escape his own shadow. The shadow responds to the physical activities of its body, in accordance to its actions and to the distance between them. The only case where the shadow cannot exist, is when there is no light. Only in a state of blindness, the body can forget about the existence its shadow. The escapist body, in distress, invites the viewer to take part in the artist's private world of pain and suffering. The situation in which he found himself are states between life and death, and create a manipulation of fear, repulsion and attraction of the viewer stretching them to a place of control loose.

Throughout these physical actions, translated into escapist motivation, the moral capabilities of the "organizers" (in this case, the body, viewers or society) creates a spectacle of sorrow. On the other hand, this can be seen as active escapism; physical or functional actions that happen in real life, motivating the artist to check if his escapist wishes are truly rational. The artist here put himself into a test of limitations, investigating the real promise of the ability to escape and break free. by blurring the boundaries between art making and life itself, allows the escapist to departure from the conventional state of the art work.

Fig. 46. Mierle Laderman Ukeles: *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, July 22, I973. Performance.

Another example of the relationship between the body (the organizer) and the shadow (the destructor symbolizing the cultural historical background of the artist) is an artist who mostly dealt with acts connected to cleaning the dirt or repairing the mess.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is a New York City-based artist known for her feminist and service-oriented artwork. Ukeles is busy with cleaning floors and staircases of galleries, museums and her own home. She can be understood as an activist: through simple inferior but necessary actions, she considers societal values and norms. What is, for her, the role of the artist?

For Ukeles, art is not a matter of making art works, but an ongoing process connected to everyday life; her "Manifesto for Maintenance Art" (I969) proclaims the infection of art by everyday mundane activities. The meaning of the cleaning actions is dual: obsessive need to maintain cleanness, carry out daily activities devoid of any artistic glorification, performing "anti-art" as a Sisyphean struggle without end end, blending and blurring the boundaries between making art and making a living. Ukeles incites artistic motivation into daily activities and so undermines the principle of the autonomy of art (Laderman Ukeles n.pag). For me, the shadow functions as a dark area with which I have to deal. In my artistic process, art is made from the incessant friction between the body and its shadow. It brings the body to make these actions which are born out of its relation to

the shadow. They are essentially artistic activities aimed at destruction and repair. The core motivation is the desire to let art be killed by itself. Is this disabled art?

[same day]

Art can kill

What happens when the destructor (the shadow) is more powerful than the organizer?

The artist Santiago Sierra said in an interview: "self-criticism makes you feel morally superior, and I give high society and high culture the mechanisms to unload their morality and their guilt". (Margolles, n.pag.) Sierra is testing the limits of social traditions through cruel acts that make cynical use of the work of art as an incentive, in order to demonstrate power, sadism, abuse and destructiveness. Some of his most famous works which involved using Iraqi immigrants as laboratory animals, asking them to wear protective clothing and cast themselves in hardening polyurethane foam as "free form" sculptures. These are all actions that try to deal with the borders of morality. How is it related to escaping than?

In my opinion, the importance of his art lies on the one hand in the lack of fear of getting dirty. On the other hand, he shows a somewhat disingenuous attitude, as art should be perceived as pluralistic and free of corruption. Sierra's social moves enable him to realize rapid destruction through artistic tools. I find his work interesting mainly because of the resistance articulated in it. He uses art in order to abuse, to break conventions of morality, and thus to question problematic social situations. But what does it say about art making itself? I see his art as one that does not want to create art. I feel that art can be the destructive shadow of the body sometimes. There is a complex relationship between the two. The artist and his art. As the shadow reflects the deeds of the body, it is used for showing scary reflection of the artist. Just like the body tries to escape his own shadow, I find myself trying to escape art, not daring to look directly into the eyes of the shadow and to understand that it is unseparated part.

Fig. 47 *Three Relationship Studies: Shadow-Play, Imitations, Manipulations* ,Vito Acconci, I970

April I7th

[Noon]

Fig. 48. Harry Houdini, a Famous Escapologist and Magician. c. I899. The Library of Congress

The terrorized body

Escape artists such as Houdini create acts in which they escape from difficult situations, from conditions that threaten their freedom and their lives. Using magic and illusion, they manage to break free from obstacles and traps in which they are imprisoned, leaving their audience stunned and confused. It is interesting to examine at this point a different approach of artistic escapism, such as Sierra's art: not as a passive, weak and rejecting mode of dealing with reality, but a mode of action which has initiative, which

requires courage, skill and healthy instincts and which proceeds by testing the limits. Art intended for survival. Escapist artistic tactics can become "active action", realizing the artist's deliberate will to release himself and to break free. It can become action which deceives with respect to life and death. In this case the act turns into a survival act where immediate emergency arrangements must be taken. Houdini achieved his fame by creating situations where he was caught between life and death. What matters is not only the act of escape itself, but also the physical and emotional preparations through which one confronts the possibility of dying or of being maimed with a clear mind.
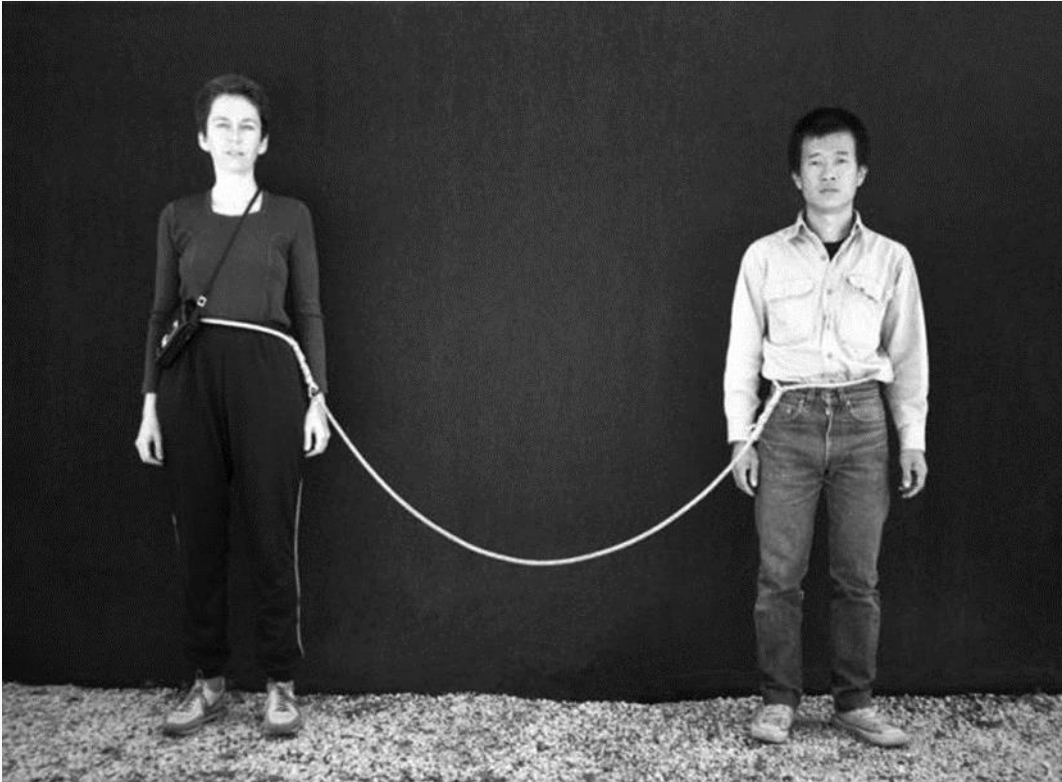
Fig. 49. Tehching Hsieh, Linda Montano, Art/Life One Year Performance I983 -I984 Life image. Copyright © I984 Tehching Hsieh, Linda Montano. | Courtesy the artists and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

The artists Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano were tied to each other with a rope for one year. *Art / Life One Year Performance I983-I984.* Being tied to each other, perhaps simulating a play of children, was a simple act intruding on every level of their private lives. For one year they were not allowed to touch one another, but they had to stay connected, live in the same room. The private space between them had to be redefined. (Hsieh n.pag). In this case, the artists related to their bodies as a "Body-Lab". This means deliberately mutilating the functioning body, creating physical and psychological limitations over their individual freedom. It was done I assume, in order to examine the ways to deal with new challenges of limitations and roles. Such an irrational action was performed in order to examine commitment, stamina and even survival.

In relation to escapism, the two artists tied themselves together in order to check the possibilities to brake free. It is in fact an expression of a planned escape process. Artistic escapism should be developed by testing limits and by particularly focusing on the need to break free. Therefore, it is necessary to cause intentional disability which serves as a starting point for the artists on their journey for liberation. I can conclude that in order to be able to escape any disablement, I first have to "terrorize" my own body and mind. Only then can the escapist action be fully performed.

In order to investigate the forms and visual outcomes of such a tactics, I believe it is important to try and define first what is a Non-Escapist Art. It is in fact a matter of true ability of art to touch upon actual events in reality. Groys is referring to this issue by saying that when art is failing to mediate between reality and memory, it is the point when it stops functioning as art. Therefore, I can conclude that a non-escapist art, is the type of art which claims to deal directly with reality, but without any success. Let's take for example the famous image of the Jordanian pilot, a victim of an execution made by ISIS:

Fig. 50. Jordanian Pilot Burned Alive by ISIS. Still from Video, 2015. Walla.

"Here we have the people who don't wait for an artist to represent their acts of war and terror. Instead, the act of war coincides with its documentation, with its representation. The function of art as a medium of representation, and the role of the artist as a mediator between reality and memory are here completely eliminated", says Groys about the false attempts to compare Art with Terror (Groys 2005)
For Groys, the contemporary artist's condition is the condition of impotency and irrelevancy, where the terrorist has become the leader of the visual collective memory.

The images used by terrorists are powerfully incorporated in collective memory, much more than any work of art which can only trace these images. The terrorist videos clearly use forms, compositions and symbolic colours which create an effect needed for remembrance. I dare to say here that the body of the person being burned in the cage can metaphorically be the body of the artist. The terrorist character of Groys produces images of the political sublime that are universally valid:

"The notion of sublime is associated for us in the first place with its analysis by Kant who has used as examples of the Sublime the images of the Swiss mountains and of the sea tempests" (ibid. n.pag.).

The main difference between the visibility of art and terror lies then, naturally, in their basic contexts. While terrorists are willing to produce a pornographic visibility of the real, the artist can only produce visual violence, a reflection of reality. The artistic context almost always maintains a final safety net which keeps art in a safe zone. The moment it will pass the border into the real, it may become terrorism. If so, I can carefully try to suggest that disabled art can be understood as art engaged in what is called real and true that faces the consequences. Art that twists the familiar logic of daily routine, acting as a terror attack, attempts to breach the social-political order. Besides the possibility of terrorizing the artist's body in order to maintain the artistic process, I shall point to another attitude, in which the motivation for art making becomes completely absurd. The artist Wim Delvoye works with the contexts of the body and the society. In one of his projects he tattooed living pigs. The main idea was to make the pig grow in value. Since 1997, the pigs have been tattooed with an elaborate array of designs,

such as crosses and skulls, Louis Vuitton designs, and free anatomic drawings.

Fig. 51. Wim Delvoye: Detail from Art Farm, Yang Zhen (Beijing). Pigs tattooed with the trademarked pattern of French luxury brand Louis Vuitton. 2003-2010.

The common denominator in each of these cases is the clear refusal of the artist to engage

in art as in a process with a "positive motivation". This resistance creates new forms of artistic behaviour, which I find, as an escapist artist, inspiring. The lack of ability, and of willingness, to work according to the standards of the art world constitutes the concept and the common ground of "Disabled Art".

Letter 7: The Fear for the Nothing

July Ith

Dear Mr. Research,

I have reached the point where my scepticism about the power and the meaning of art have brought me to stop making art. In this new state I completely avoid everything that could be considered art making: I isolate myself from the art world and boycott museums, galleries and all art-related reading; instead, I try to think functionally, acquire a real profession like web designer or computer engineer, have regular sleeping habits, eat well, burn all my sketch books, ignore e-mails and phone calls from curators and avoid residencies, grants and applications. Nothing of that. Disabled art is making nothing. Trying to face the real life, the real world, stop hiding behind art. As a result of that, created a new space that is not familiar to me. A space of nothing, that is not filled with artistic activities, a whole new hollow experience.

Recently I had the opportunity to watch again the fantastic film The Never-ending Story. The entire plot focuses on the fear and terror caused by the invisible enemy called the "nothing". The nothing, described as a living entity, threatens to destroy the kingdom of fantasy mainly because of the fact that people have stopped dreaming. The film's plot develops in parallel with the materialized threat that the nothing will destroy the kingdom completely, leaving behind a great dark void. It is visualized in the film as an abstract cloud spreading in all directions. At some point the protagonist, a boy warrior sent to defeat the cruel enemy, understands that all the residents of Fantasia have leapt, due to the irresistible pull of the destructive phenomenon, voluntarily into the nothing in order to become lies and delusions of the human world. Why is the nothingness so threatening?

Fig. 52. The Nothing. Still Image from The Never-ending Story Film. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. Neue Constantin Film and Warner Bros. Pictures, 1984.

The Never-ending Story

As an artistic concept, the nothing symbolizes in my works the inability or unwillingness of art to deal with reality. In this situation, the void of nothingness takes place as a concrete visual image. The "weak and disabled" art, opposed to artistic production, creates "dead zones" due to its avoidance. With my escapist artistic attitude, I have made the effort to disappear and to be not involved, creating a great void instead of visual outcomes. There are already too many images in the world. The consequences of this kind of art might be intimidating or disappointing with regard to a visual artist like me who lives and works in Israel and is expected to reflect on its complicated reality.

From my point of view, disappearance seems to be a necessary step in escapist artistic tactics. Escapism, or an inability to cope, produces the desire to disappear and to become invisible. Invisibility is an interesting position for a visual artist who is supposed to produce images. The attempt to disappear is a statement concerning the way I deal with the process of art-making, taking a clear stand. The void left behind, one which could be called the "nothingness", is often very intimidating and its creates among the viewers a feeling of instability and great confusion regarding how artists should behave and how art should function.

Fig. 53. Detail from AID - Artistic Institute for Disappearing. 2011. Installation. Illustration by ME

 In the year of 20II I tried to disappear!
I was invited to participate in an exhibition held at an unusual location, a sewage
treatment plant. For this exhibition I prepared in advance drawings and made plans of
how to build an institute for disappearing, one which I called A.I.D. (Artistic
Institute of Disappearing). The Institute was built on the foundations of the waste
water plant's parking lot. The designed divisions and departments formed a "conveyor
belt" leading towards the promise of disappearance.

Fig. 54. Detail from AID - Artistic Institute for Disappearing. 20II. Installation. Illustration by ME

The "client" was invited to enter the registration office there he/she was asked to leave
their personal details. This is the first stage in the process of disappearing, and
therefore the registration file was based on personal questions such as: what was the last
meal they had, or who are the people who are dear to their heart. Then the disappearing
viewer was followed to continue into small and private intimate peepshow-style watching
lockers, in order to watch short videos, which were offering guidance and giving tips
about how to disappear. Each individual locker, was equipped with a personal screen, a
chair and a tissue box. The videos which were screened in a loop in the individual cells
were assembled from existing material and recycled images from the Internet and YouTube.
The Institute didn't use any new visual materials. After having watched the video, the
viewer continued to a room where he was measured with special tools and judged according
various criteria. Then he proceeded to the last station, the disappearance room, where he
found a smoke machine and a big neon sign saying: Everything will be ok. The institute

building was rickety, it had been built overnight, and it gave a general impression of being temporary and sham.

There is, of course, no guaranteed disappearance, and the great effort is doomed to be failure from the start. But the curiosity concerning disappearance and desire to disappear is left. The tremendous efforts invested by the Institute in disappearing did not lead to deliverance - as is true of a work of art which can guarantee a lot but never deliver.

The passion for disappearance and its well-known failure have been my main concern in this project. "Recently my work with colour has led me, in spite of myself, to search little by little, with some assistance (from the observer, from the translator), for the realization of matter, and I have decided to end the battle. My paintings are now invisible and I would like to show them in a clear and positive manner, in my next Parisian exhibition at Iris Clert's" (Stich I33). Yves Klein has dealt with the concept of the void. His Void is an ambiguous space which can be translated into notions or influences; it is a neutral zone where the viewer is asked to pay attention to different sensibilities and to "reality" as opposed to "artistic representation". Klein presents its approach to the concept of the void as an artistic environment or event. He used the common idea of a void as nothingness, using it as a raw material that shapes his works of art. Without concrete content (paintings without pictures, a book without words, a musical composition without a composition), leaving behind a great void. In this way he tries to create for the audience "Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility". Klein was interested in the space persisting after the event. (Klein n.pag.)

Fig. 55. Yves Klein: Leap into the Void, 5, rue Gentil-Bernard, Fontenay-aux-Roses, France, October I960. Artistic action by Yves Klein. Photo by Harry Shunk-John Kender. The Artist and Roy Lichtenstein Foundation. Yves Klein Archives.

Lack of presence in art frequently highlights absence, turning it into the subject. This is an interesting feature which raises the question, why is it so important for us to fill the void.

Unlike Klein, my motivation in A.I.D. was not to allow for fascination of the void, but rather to create an illusion of salvation which through sincere attempts might vanish. The desire to disappear gave rise to a sham institute and big expectations never to be realized. Predictable failures like this reveal that the honest attempt to disappear is ridiculous, but at the same time they keep the artistic escapist intentions pure and basic.

Fig. 56. Jan Bas Ader: *Please Don't Leave Me,* 1969. Black and White Photograph, 26.4 x 33.7 cm. Museum Boijmans.

July 2th

[night]

"No" is also an answer

The artist Lee Lozano managed to leave the art world almost 30 years before her death in 1999. It happened after a decade of a very fruitful career in New York, where she had made her drawings, paintings, performances and conceptual activities. She is a good example of an artist who reached a point where she decided to resign and leave the art world. (Is that possible?)

Concerning this decision, she carried out two acts of resistance and refusal in the form

of art works: "In General Strike Piece, begun in I969, she decided to withdraw from the art world, and recorded the process by documenting the last times she visited museums or attended gallery openings. That same year she began a month-long 'boycott' of women, which she then extended and continued for the rest of her life" (Eleey n.pag.). During this artistic act, she conducted a meticulous diary in which she noted her recent visits to galleries and museum. It is reminiscent of a rehab program. As with any detox process, there are successes and failures along the way, and the end of this process is unclear. Here art is seen as a nasty habit, something one should avoid in order to continue to survive as human being. Lozano was not the only artist to challenge the limits of the art scene of the time, but within her escapist attitude she went further, implementing de-constructive manners of the artist ego in favour of "sharing". It is interesting to see how Lozano creates a confusion between her art and her personal life. "I will be human first, artist second", she wrote in I97I. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of her work was the way she communicated with her audience, creating out of her loneliness a socially shared net. Once she wrote a "Note to myself" as if ignoring the fact that people were watch her every move. (Eleey n.pag.)

Here comes the question about authenticity and honesty: is honesty important in this case? Lozano's confusion between private thoughts and performed emotions, both in art and life, remains unresolved. She records her abandonment process, but fills the space left empty with the act of leaving itself. The act of escaping, abandonment, disappearance, becomes a central issue here, while the consequences are negligible. As I see it, it is an act born out of weakness and disintegration, out of her inability to work in the art world as an artist. Being exhausted by the way the world goes round brings her to a point where she breaks the rules and stop playing, while she must, at the same time, continue producing art by documenting her vanishing act.

Fig. 57. Lozano, Lee. General Strike Piece. I969. offset print, 28 cm x 2I.5 cm. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas, Austin. Pastelegram

July 3th

So what do disappearance acts or escaping attempts leave behind?

Apparently nothing. Representing silence in art involves a paradox: silence represented "properly" would amount to meaninglessness. The use of silence as a raw material can often be seen as an error, leaving no context with regard to which communication could take place. The key for understanding the use of nothingness in the form of silence may come from tracing the artist's motivation to create a quiet void. "This is an odd and not very promising strategy, one might think, in the light of what results might reasonably be anticipated from it. But perhaps not so odd, after all, when one observes how often the aesthetics of silence appears hand in hand with a barely controlled abhorrence of the void." (Sontag "The Aesthetics of Silence" 27)

Seedbed by Vito Acconci is another interesting example of how to produce void spaces. In

his "self-disappearing" act, motivated by escapist attitude, art corresponds to an aberration or a socially banned habit. In this work, the artist was hiding under a low wooden ramp merging with the floor. During the show, the gallery space was left empty, creating the impression of a significant space where nothing visible is present, but which at the same time responded directly to the outer world. In his performance, Acconci laid hidden underneath the ramp and masturbated. During visitor's hours, his spoken fantasies about the visitors walking above him were heard through loudspeakers in the gallery.
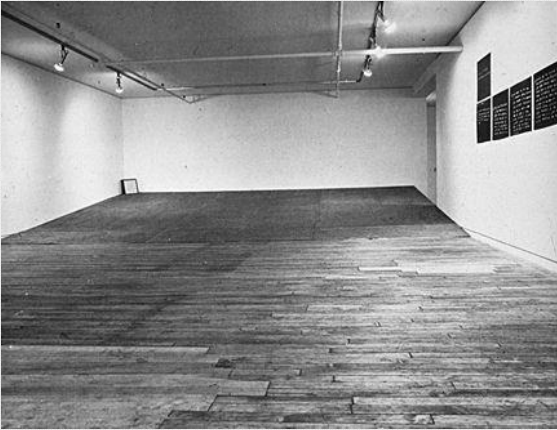
Fig. 58. Vito Acconci: *Detail from the Performance Seedbed*, I972. Gelatin Silver Print, 20.I x 29.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The emptiness and the game of hide and seek with the artist was more intimidating and intriguing due to the lack of visible items. The artistic product carried different meaning as it was impregnated with questions of perversion, creativity and madness. In this case, the quietness and nothingness broke the conventional expectation of having a work of art shown in the gallery. The act of masturbation is not acceptable to be performed in public, but it's a direct reaction to the act of making art. Acconci is communicating with the "real world outside" through a "shameful", private and unsocial behaviour. His disappearance is just a cover story for other acts he did, acts which are not allowed to be seen publicly. It undermines the boundaries of the familiar and the stable precisely because there is nothing concrete to hold on in the gallery space. In such cases, silence sharpens the viewer's senses, places him in an emergency situation, in uncertainty or wonder. The side sounds of the silencing turn the relationship between the viewer and the artwork into one between "the hunter and the hunted". It is more threatening than anything expressible in words, since the sounds signal a danger, helping to capture the artist in the act. In addition, it greatly disappoints the viewer, but at the same time the artist runs a major risk of being caught in his own private act of art, while making every effort to hide and not be seen.

A few months ago, I was invited to make an art work for an exhibition in a small gallery. The curator asked me to prepare something under the topic "The pretenders". I had nothing to say about the topic. Eventually I recorded myself inside an aeroplane, just before taking off and escaping to an unknown destination, not willing to cope with reality. I called this document "Sorry". In the short video I apologized deeply to my audience for my irresponsibility as an artist, for being unable or unwilling to produce art under command. I felt ashamed for not being able to make proper art and promised to be a better artist in the future.

Fig. 59 Detail from *Sorry*, Kav 16 Gallery, 2013. ME

In my artistic practice I see silencing as a survival act. It is an act which requires basic skills - cruelly, it keeps me going on in a reality of endless war. The disciplinary state makes of me, the artist of survival, an obedient citizen, and through my creation I
reflect on the absurdity of the impossible existence in the Israeli reality.

Letter 8: Last letter

July 28th

[Last Letter]

> teachings and rejoice forever in the words of Thy Torah and in its commandments, for they are our life and the length of our days. Day and night will we meditate upon them. O may Thy love never depart from us. Blessed be Thou, O Lord, who lovest Thy people Israel.

Fig. 60 From: Saturday's evening service

Dear Mr. Research,

This will be my last letter to you.

In my letters I have tried to examine the complex and problematic condition I call "Disabled art". I coined this notion due to the situation in which I live as an Israeli-Jewish artist. Through my letters I have tried to explore the questions this notion gives rise to: What exactly is Disabled Art? Why is it transformed into artistic escapism? And how does reflect on art making? Is it really possible to escape?

The artistic condition, both physical and emotional, called Disabled Art responds directly and indirectly to reality, allowing a different approach for art making. The investigation of this notion was born out of the need to understand my role as an artist, as I was only weakly or not at all capable of encountering reality through artistic means. The outcomes affected by this condition are manifest as a study of the escapist attitude toward art making, of the creative process and its results. The act of writing has created the character outlines of the escapist artist who examines his abilities and the implications involved. During the process of writing, I have reported the changes I have undergone, considering the dynamic outline of the artist who tries to kill art.

Now, I've decided to stop writing because I found that regardless of how hard I try to escape, I will always need to return to the same place I'm escaping from. The escapist artist cannot exist without belonging to a place and identifying with it, the one from

which he wants to break free. The motivation to resist, to run away or to define itself as "disabled" can take place only in constant contact with the reality in which it is located. Maintaining connections to the political, social and historical issues is a basic condition and a feeding ground for the endless desire to escape. Therefore, this motivation will always remain a desire, and will never come to fruition. I hope you understand. That's why I cannot be an escapist artist without being constantly tied to and dependent on the place to which I belong. The need to escape and the place/identity/situation from which to escape from are constantly nourishing each other, allowing them a mutual existence. None of the sides can exist without the other. Therefore, the "escapist-disabled artist" will always be dependent on this conflicted situation and will always be obliged to return back home. I now notice that my escape attempts were doomed from the start to be a failure. I recognize that the escapist artist cannot avoid creating works of art, if some evidence should be left behind. I find that I need to define identity, just as I need to escape from it.

Therefore, I have no other choice but to return home.

Fig. 6I. The Entrance to My Home, 20I5. Illustration by ME.

Appendix: Documentation of Art works

https://www.researchcatalogue.net/

1. *HAMAVDIL: "Distinguishing between the sacred and the profane",* 2004. A series of 40 photographs, colour print 30 x 40 cm. The series of photographs made before my doctoral studies is presented here as artistic background material. It is a documentation of fictitious creations, tracing an imaginary impersonation of an ultra-orthodox. The photos were taken during my residence time in Jerusalem as I was an art student. Over one year I changed and manipulated my own identity and my surroundings to produce faked Orthodox figures. Relatives and friends were asked to perform in ceremonies and rituals so as to behave like "friends and family" in an Orthodox context. The photos offer evidence for my attempts to create such an imaginary but also possible alternative reality. Through the visual presence of the Orthodox world I addressed the implications of what the ultra-Orthodox society tries to convey: the promise inherent in religion, the way to redemption, the family values, stability and faith, power and integrity.

2. *My Ghetto.* Video Installation: video, photography, performance, 2010. The walls of the exhibition space of *My Ghetto* were covered with thousands of computer printed flowers – photos I took during one year. During the show I sat in the exhibition space to print more and more of them. On a big screen I projected a 15 minutes long video, which compressed the documentation of 80 hours of intensive speech in front of a camera. The video consists of reporting (partly imaginary) experiences I had in my ghetto. After the testimonial part, the video ends with live translation of the song *My Ghetto* by Hanoch Levin.

3. *Documentary about the holocaust,* 2012. A 20 min. video work which attempts to trace how to make memorial films about the Holocaust. It exposes the mechanisms through which collective memory is being constructed through institutional imagery, manipulation and clichés.

4. *The Artistic Institute for Disappearing*, 2011. Mixed media installation. The AID – Artistic Institute of Disappearing – was established in April 2011 on the ground of an active human sewage treatment plant near Tel Aviv. The institute addresses – through a Kafkaesque experience – the clear motivation to disappear or to reshape identity through artistic tools. The sham institute aims to guide the disappearing person through different didactic stages and guide lines based on a complete failure.

5. *Sorry,* 2013. A video installation, documents, tables and screen. A work commissioned by a gallery owner on the topic "Impostors". The project deals with the lack of ability or willingness to produce a work of art and the artist's reaction to it: escape. It raises questions about the role of the artist and the responsibility he has in relation to social and political matters.

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