

# ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ

## The crossed memories of Auber...99

*"Each one of us is guilty before everyone and for everything  
and myself more than the others"  
Dostoïevski, " The Karamazov Brothers"*

From Plato to Hegel, the philosophical discourse has incessantly brought the Other (*l'Autre*) back to the Same within the knowledge/power of Thought. This conquering thought which tended to objectivize the Other by subjecting him to it, annihilated him in the name of Sameness if he persisted in maintaining his Otherness. In the last analysis, the "final solution" presented itself as the paroxysmal expression of this totalitarian paranoia : a discourse that has become inaudible "after Auschwitz". Yet as Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher who has tried to think the *"other in the absolute sense"* willingly repeats, "The other person is *another*". Not only must I accept him, I must love him as he is. (1)

*"Portraits of Stories"* by Esther Shalev-Gerz made and presented at Aubervilliers (and Marseilles) appears to proceed from the same intention. We know that at the request of the "Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers", the artist questioned the inhabitants (fifty nine) of this town (part of the Parisian conglomerate), in front of a video camera by suggesting that they fill an open empty form as they wished by answering this one question : "What story should be told today ?" , each one of them being entirely free to talk about whatever he wanted, to choose the place where he would be filmed and even not to appear on the screen at all. This is why the "voice off" of one of the participants talks to us about the acclimatization of an African flower, while a close-up of this same flower is shown on the screen throughout his intervention.

Esther Shalev-Gerz opposes the "there is" of the subject, the "too much" of oneself of the usual interviewer, against the concern for staying out of the picture (apparently contradictory to the egotistical notion of the artist, whom we specifically expect to make his presence felt throughout the subject he is treating and within the accomplished work) by letting the other person talk freely, the only other person being the silent presence of the camera. It is perhaps this total autonomy left to the subject-speaker that makes me experience each of the fifty nine participants in the project as individuals who are absolutely "other" as they appear successively on the screen. The other one in relation to others and all others in their respective singularities in relation to myself, who is looking at them and listening to them speak.

In fact, "the subject invests in all and everything because, as an empty form of singularity, not only does he appropriate what is his intimate individuality but also he projects himself into what goes beyond him and tears him apart (others, history, its times) by imprinting for better or for worse his singular mark, his print, that he contributes via this to constituting the world or at least to leave a trace..."(2)

Faced with this successive display of Otherness, the artist's ego and consequently our own, feels "subordinated to the other !" ("he who is always beyond and outside of me"). In the same way, Esther Shalev-Gerz is inaugurating a new form of portrait-making. No longer the kind practised for centuries by painters then photographers through commissioned work. But there where the work of art has conquered its autonomy, as a form of mediation within a subject-object relationship through which the artist might freely express his own subjective vision of the person thus depicted, even as a means of making an inventory of human types to the point of constructing a typology from the diversity of social experiences, in the way of the German photographer August Sander. Or, in the "era of technical reproductibility", by proposing a mechanical version, a parody that is complacent in the great tradition of famous people portraits like so many vignettes emptied of any pretention to truth (Andy Warhol : from Marilyn to Mao). Or again, by lending oneself to role portraits in the manner of the American artist-photographer Cindy Sherman who, in the absence of her own identity and by the inexhaustible representation of stereotypes-figures, deprives the (self) portrait of any interiority, of any subjective consistency.

We might finally evoke the medallion portraits of the young children from the Five Continents by Jeff Wall, regrouped into an ideal community by the mediation color-photos on glass, which make reference to the great Western pictural tradition.

On the other hand, and in terms of what concerns her, Esther Shalev-Gerz starts from "the subjective time of each one" of the participants (3). The author's traditional category seems to have disappeared in benefit of that of the operator, and that of the work in benefit of action, a disappearance that ratifies the neutrality of a linear assembly devoid of any commentary.

Specifically, this is the subject of the "portrait" that indirectly solicits the artist so that he manifests his presence and freely expresses something of his own subjectivity. That of "existences accumulated in their daily life and fleeting, ordinary course of event, (which) perhaps produce more than exceptional works do"...(4) In their presence, it is a little of that truth that I can catch a glimpse of. I really look at these faces, which are not reduced to being an object of curiosity or a simple image. I am concerned by their Otherness. It links me *ethically* to others.

Because what is offered to me is, first and foremost, a succession of faces. Those of beings I am incited to "face-in" rather than "face-out" An encounter with their "strangeness" which has nothing in common with the "sight" of the face conceived like an object of the photographer or the video-maker, but whose "appearing preserves an exteriority which is also an appeal -or an imperative given to (my) responsibility."

If we can conceive that man was created in God's image, then the face, so compromised by modern means of reproduction, could be the place which brings us the revelation : each face is unique and it's the sum of these singularities that allegorically reaches the universal and that Esther Shalev-Gerz allows me to approach through their diversity.

"The portrait for me today is being at least two. You and I, myself and the other person, until infinity." (5) In the linking of these faces, which present themselves to me before disappearing to let another take its place, continuity and discontinuity converse together as is suggested by superimposing a visible moment of the one who is already appearing before the preceding one is erased. And, as is underlined by the photographs obtained by freezing the image that were hung on the walls of the space next to the video installation: the other person is close to me and yet elusive.

Do we not experience "...the feeling that I (*je*) owe everything to You (*tu*), that the other *rightfully* always has a right over me, an obligation that is ordered by the other's face - with this double structure of human misery and the word of God" and which is marked by the relationship of the *assymetry* between the one speaking and myself who is looking at him ? In this attention given to me, I perhaps find a little bit of the sacred character of art. Here, the tenuous thread seems to link the interpersonal relationship previous to the subject-object relationship, which tends to destroy it. And "what movement can manage to seize the elusive proximity of the other person better than language " through which Esther's portraits tell me a "story" ? In fact, all these faces are not only silent portraits. An occasion for opening the way to so many othernesses, these are also "real men and women" who confide, without having participated in any form of too often artificial and directive interactivity and through the subjective time of their own discourse, something of their situation in the world, in other words, of their own experience and therefore of the "*real*" which my conscience reaches not by some "internal development" but by the radical discovery of the "*other than oneself*" (6). And for the artist, without doubt, this means that the fact of not producing her representation of the world does not make her shut herself up in the ivory tower of her own subjectivity but, on the contrary, project herself beyond herself. As Esther Shalev-Gerz indicates : "all my works in public space rely on people's participation". And what could be more *real* than the experience lived by this public ? "Because of their exposure to all the different changes in language, nationality, culture and lifestyle, these people have a sense of contemporary values". (7). In addition, it is the voices that make themselves heard from the *periphery* of the structuring space of our modern cities. This position is even more eloquent in that, for a long time and even still today, official art, in spite of appearances, has accustomed us to situating ourselves close to the *Centre*, of power, market organization and media communication. In short, institutions which allow it to expose itself, to such an extent that with Globalization, the very famous Wall Street *Golden Boys* have become the best supporters of contemporary (kitsch) art. An art that has hardly any echo outside of the Centre and in which people from places such as Aubervilliers barely recognize themselves but which imposes itself on a whole public of speculators because of the record prices it achieves in the sales rooms. Its exchange value, in line with stock exchange speculation has irremediably destroyed the usage value, if indeed this art ever had one (8).

On the other hand, in the *Portraits of Stories*, as in most of Esther Shalev-Gerz's interventions in public space, a work is made around memory which blends into a horizontal contribution of participants "a subjective, fleeting and fragmentary memory" but essential to the appearance of the work *plurally* conceived as a "place of memory" to which each person adds his own stone. (9).

The sum of Esther Shalev-Gerz's "*Portraits of Stories*" constitutes a monument erected against time, which passes by the living memory of its inhabitants testifying to an infinite

sum of othernesses - new and old comers, the young and the old, black and white, people with roots or just passing through, that chance or necessity brought here one day, lately or a long time ago, but who presently belong to one and the same community. In spite of or because of this diversity, it emanates an intersubjectivity of "us" which could be perfectly democratic. Today, it is to "them" and to the very heterogeneousness of their individual stories, to which the end of the 'Great Tales' no longer provide the comfort and immediate hope of radical transformations in a solidary fight, that it is right to call upon building a form of commemorative monument. To memory : "the first comers, the Auverngats driven away by the rural misery of the 19th century... the last comers from Mali " and also including the successive waves of Alsations, Italians, Polish, Spanish, Algerians, Portugese or Sri-Lankans... "all identically imigrants or workers, transplated in Auber...all henceforth carriers of a "double culture and a double fidelity". (10). By starting from the subjectiveness of the other person (*l'Autre*) and by contenting oneself with perfectly *horizontal* editing ( of a duration of 2h 25) subtly contrasted but respectful of the each individual story's own singularity, without introducing the slightest personal commentary or suggesting the slightest conclusion, Esther Shalev-Gerz's anti-subectivism opens onto our era, "that's to say, not a lapse of inert and neutral time but an historical configuration inhabited with a meaning" (11). If, in as much as the very notion of commemoration can still have a meaning in this world more suffering than acting, perpetually driven by forces which often go beyond even those people that they push onto the road to exile, then Esther Shalev- Gerz's "*Portraits of Stories*" bear witness to a memory that will be that of our times. A monument, therefore, but virtual, which would not be destined to occupy any particular *place*, a "hyper" image (or a hyper text) that modern audiovisual means allow us to reactivate at any moment. Esther Shalev-Gerz's "*Portraits of Stories*" thus present themselves as an accomplished form within the exploration of public space founded on participation.

This redefinition of the monument, conceived by Esther Shalev-Gerz as an actualization of a form of plural expression, has its antecedants. In a previous work such as the *Monument against Fascism* undertaken with Jochen Gerz in 1986 in Hamburg, *ordinary* passers-by were invited to express their feelings with regard to fascism at a moment precisely when the extreme right had reappeared on the German political scene.

They could engrave their own opinions on a lead column that disappeared gradually under ground as it was covered with their inscriptions. A perspective view of the present in relation to a near past in a monument destined to become invisible once this actualization was accomplished. Also in collaboration with Jochen Gerz *Reasons for Smiles* initiated in October 1996 in Paris at the Cirque d'Hiver and on City electronic billboards during the FIAC (International Art Fair) is also founded on participation. Here third parties participate in the project as producers of their own photographic portraits that they are invited to send to the two artists in undeveloped film rolls. The result of *Reasons for Smiles* is then presented likes a series of "Fragments" of an unfinsihed project (until now realized in Paris, Göttingen, Tallahassee-Florida, Vancouver or Arles) in the form of transparent negatives, enlarged and fixed on mirrors, where the spectator can superimpose the reflection of his own face... An approach without doubt closer to that of Stanley Brouwn, when he took the footprints of passers-by or asked them to trace their path on a sheet of paper in the streets of Amsterdam, rather than to the appropriation and archiving by Christian Boltanski of anonymous identity photos...

In addition to monumental public space where the artist calls upon the memory of Others, Esther Shalev-Gerz also reserves a space for herself where she is also a sculptress and photographer and where her art can be more personal, even more intimate. But this is undoubtedly another aspect of her work...

Claude Gintz, Paris

#### notes

1. François Poirié - Emmanuel Lévinas, Actes Sud, 1996, All the following quotes come from the same source, except if mentioned.
2. Eric Marty, *Louis Althusser, un sujet sans procès*, Gallimard/ L'Infini, 1999, p. 17.
3. Esther Shalev-Gerz, *The Portraits of Stories*, Project presentation.
4. Edouard Glissant, *Le roman des Batoutos*, Gallimard, 1999.
5. *Taktik*, 503, 16-23 juin 1999, interview of the artist by Delphine Huetz.
6. Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, François Maspero, 1973, p.144.
7. *Visuel(s)*, spring 1999, interview of the artist by Alice Laguarda, p. 7.
8. On the occasion of the auction of "Pink panther" in new york, a ceramic realized by Jeff Koons in 1988, went for \$1.817.500, world record for the american artist's work, the daily newspaper "Le Monde" didn't hesitate to print on it's "Culture" page(sic!)two photographs, front and back, of the sculpture in question (a woman with generous curves holding against her chest the stunned eyed pink panther).
9. v. Esther Shalev-Gerz, *The perpetual movement of memory*.
10. François Maspéro, *The passengers of the Roissy-Express*, Ed. du Seuil, sept. 1990. Marty, op. cit., p. 17. faire et de dire qui appartient à tous.