

ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ

Between listening and telling

The work of Esther Shalev-Gerz creates interruptions, proposing a shift of perceptions of history and the present through a series of encounters. For the last 20 years she has been creating a powerful artistic practice reflexively built on communication. In the act of transmitting information, ideas and knowledge a sense of shared experience becomes underlined - and sometimes established. Operating as an insert between the social act of speaking and the image, Shalev-Gerz's practice locates itself between listening and telling in a space where memory is articulated. Memory is personal, political, collective, partial, and at all times contingent: by engaging with personal histories, ideas of fixed history can be challenged. Gertrude Stein spoke of the continuous present, a notion concerned with experience and knowledge, as well as knowledge of experience and experience of knowledge. The idea was suggested to her by the then relatively young medium of film and she applied it to the process of creating a portrait, writing: "in a cinema picture no two pictures are alike each one is just that much different than before . . . each time that I said the somebody whose portrait I was writing was something that something was just that much different from what I had just said that somebody was and little by little in this way a whole portrait came into being."¹ This statement by Stein refers to fundamental elements of Shalev-Gerz's work - language, the portrait, and telescoping the past through the present. She creates a new notion of portraiture and remembrance, layering frames of memory on to the present, making every experience of her work unique and extended into space and time.

Shalev-Gerz creates portraits through stories. In a portrait, be it abstract or figurative, an artist will unconsciously represent themselves through their own subjectivities. She refers to the second commandment which, across religions, warns against making 'graven images' and brings this theological question to her practice to problematise images. Referring to her own cultural background, she describes how her work developed in response to the ways that Judaism considers representation of the world. She says: "you cannot rely on images, you have to remember. History begins there for me. All of my works have this negotiation – I need to question the use of representation. If I can avoid copying, I can use an idea. I need to personalise what I work with."². By allowing memory to be heard Shalev-Gerz creates a dialogue with the past, initiating a conversation with those who encounter her work. In order to understand and retain knowledge one needs to participate: educationalists have established that a discursive approach leads to students remembering *and* understanding information. As Duchamp noted: "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution

¹ Gertrude Stein, *Portraits and Repetition*, 1926

² conversation with author, 2004

to the creative act.”³ Throughout her practice, Shalev-Gerz has pushed at the boundaries of art making while firmly referencing art history. To position her work within the field of artistic production is to take a path from historical portrait painting through to the tender interventions of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and the collective projects of Mark Dion via artists who draw on documentary modes of telling stories, such as Kutlug Ataman or Anri Sala. In younger artists her work has its counterparts in practices that eschew the image for interaction with individuals, such as Tino Segal and Kathrin Böhm, as well as those who interrogate relationships between identity and place, such as Emily Jacir and Eva Weinmayr. Existing and re-existing in time, Shalev-Gerz’s practice has paved the way for artwork that that is *of*, rather than *about*, the world.

To think of the past through the present is to evoke Walter Benjamin’s angel of history. In 2000 Shalev-Gerz was commissioned by the city of Weimar to make a work inspired by an artist who had resided in the city and she chose Paul Klee. Research is at the heart of her practice, and here it produced *The Imaginary House of Walter Benjamin*, developed from writings making reference to Klee’s 1920 watercolour *Angelus Novus*. This small image was purchased by Benjamin in 1921 and remained one of his most precious possessions. Benjamin saw *Angelus Novus* as an embodiment of *his* present, writing: “His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appear to *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe which relentlessly piles wreckage upon wreckage, and hurls them before his feet.”⁴ This is an admonishment to remember the past in order to understand the present – an idea crucial to Shalev- Gerz’s thinking. A video shows a journey the artist took in the first taxi available from Weimar to Buchenwald, the former concentration camp 6km outside the city. The driver can be heard talking to the artist, pop music in the background, as they wind through an idyllic countryside on a blue-skied crisp day, with the light sharpening the landscape, creating an almost sublime representation of this landscape familiar to Goethe. In walking a line between speech and image Shalev- Gerz creates a body of work that eruditely draws the viewer in through visual and intellectual means. The driver warns the passenger of the bumpy road – it was made in 1936 by the occupants of the camp and has been left untended as a reminder of this labour. The driver informatively speaks of the landscape, the camp, and its history, discussing the importance of not forgetting what happened on this site. The conversation is interrupted sporadically by a different voice reading extracts of the writings inspired by *Angelus Novus* and with these readings the image breaks down, seeming to double and overlap into itself. The installation includes a clock with two faces - like Benjamin’s Angel, opposing directions are paired, one looking to the future, the other to the past. It is in this space that the present exists: infused with memory and anticipation of what is yet to come, Shalev-Gerz excavates the site of memory through perforations in time and space.

History will always be a subjective reading of the past, contingent on memory, interpretation, language, and the present. Prior to joining the Valand Art School in Sweden as professor, Shalev-Gerz was invited by the Swedish Historical Museum to make a work. *White Out: Between Telling and Listening* (2002) draws together place and memory into a dialogue referencing a particular context that can be extrapolated out into others. To think of place is not simply to consider a map reference: it is defined by those who directly and indirectly interact with it. *White Out* investigates how two peoples, the

³ Marcel Duchamp, *The Creative Act*, American Federation of the Arts, 1957

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History IX*, 1939

Sami⁵ and Swedish, can co-exist on the same land, taking the first identifiable references that are the same in the Sami and Swedish languages as a point of departure. Having established this research, Shalev-Gerz set out to meet a person who lived across the modernity and tradition of the two cultures. She was introduced to Asa Simma, a Sami living in Stockholm who synthesised her two identities, embodying their contradictions. Two video projections face each other in the installation: one of Simma talking in a contemporary urban apartment responding to the researched statements, the other of her listening to her own responses on headphones, standing in the landscape of Karesuando in Northern Sweden where she was born. Simma remembers her childhood, recounting her life as part of the Sami, talking of fond and painful memories, as well as of Swedish attitudes to the nomadic indigenous people. She becomes more localised as she continues with her story, giving a voice to a people who are rarely heard and, while listening to herself, her expressions show her taking on the weight of what she has said. A sense of doubling abounds in Shalev-Gerz's work. The paired projections are shown alongside photographs of archive boxes from the Swedish Historical Museum: these are from the stores of over 2 million objects that have been collected. This is an archive telling a history that is fixed - an opposite of Shalev-Gerz's dynamic sense of the past. She initiates experiences that have far reaching effects on the one who speaks and on those who listen: through acts of listening and telling the lives of people are fundamentally changed by increasing an awareness of their own and opposing perceptions of the world.

Notions of permanence and memory are central to Shalev-Gerz's practice. *First Generation* (2004) is a permanent video installation that, again, starts with the telling of stories; this time making the spaces between words explicit. It is a sense of place, as well as the personal that informs Shalev-Gerz's work: collective portraits are inscribed into the specifics of place. The location for *First Generation* is Botkyrka - a suburb of Stockholm built for people from the northern part of the country wishing to move to the city, later becoming destination for recent immigrants. To be of a first generation is to negotiate a way of life and identity through language, behaviour and perception of oneself and others - an experience familiar to Shalev-Gerz who has consistently been a new arrival, moving from Lithuania, to Israel, to New York, and to Paris where she has lived for the last 20 years. This project invited people who were first arrivals to reflect on their own identities. Shalev-Gerz's practice is about working *with* people and involves layers of communication. Here, as with other works, the host organisation was asked to find people to work with, creating a new institutional interactions with local people. Any choice of who to work with will be influenced by one's own perceptions meaning that such a selection will not be neutral: the make up of that group will reflect the *habitus* of the selector. For example, one may choose people who one feels comfortable with, or people who fit with one's preconceptions of a 'local' or 'immigrant'. In this way, Shalev-Gerz creates not only a self-portrait, but also a portrait of those who she works with at all stages of the project.

The invited people form the next layer of interaction, and built on top of this are visitors to the exhibition. People who those visitors then talk to about the work create a further series of relationships that, like all human interactions, develops through conversation and transmission of experience. Each contributor to *First Generation* was filmed replying to a set of questions: "On your coming to Botkyrka, what did you lose? What did you find? What did you get? What did you give?" These questions were also etched into the stone steps of the building housing the installation, posing the same questions to all that enter.

⁵ Indigenous people of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia, often referred to Lapps

Following each interview the statements are played back to the speaker who is filmed a second time, with the camera closely studying the face showing the barely perceptible changes that occur as one listens to one's own words and encountering oneself. In such an intimate study of a person's face a sense of beauty abounds. It is only when we are emotionally close to a person that we scrutinise a face so closely. In talking about their very sense of self the residents of Botkyrka speak of the truly personal, with the power of this leaving its trace in beauty. Shalev-Gerz's interactions with people reveal such moments of personal tenderness: her way with people is one of thought and care, each person who encounters her is given a sense of their own importance. Again, a self-portrait occurs: it is only through the generosity of Shalev-Gerz's personality that such moments of self-recognition are possible. This visual element of the work is shown as a large projection viewable from the outside of the building through a glass façade which, means that it is only visible after dark which creates a level of impermanence to this permanent work. Inside a sound installation collages the Botkyrka residents' responses together in the order of the questions asked rather than by speaker. The gap between the identity of the voices and faces of the individuals is left to be negotiated by each viewer.

Shalev-Gerz's earlier work *Monument Against Fascism* (1986-93) again engaged with issues of remembering the recent past through temporality. The city of Hamburg initiated a public discussion about the construction of a monument against fascism, inviting artists to submit proposals for a permanent construction in the city: a project by Shalev-Gerz, with Jochen Gerz, was selected. Sited in a busy public square, it took the form of a column that stood, initially, 12m tall, with the surface a sheet of lead onto which passers-by were invited engrave their signatures in a public statement about fascism. As the visible surface became covered with marks -some signatures, others statements- it was lowered into the ground until the topmost surface became level with the pavement. Over the seven years that the column stood above ground the political, economic and sociological situation changed, and these shifts became reflected in the marks people chose to inscribe. As it disappeared from view the marks maintained their trace permanently in the memories of those that made, read, or heard about this act of communication. To make a monument that disappears is to destabilise its experience and context completely, cementing it into memory. The *Monument Against Fascism* constructed a space for memories through an active participation reflecting the location of the monument itself, becoming a portrait of Hamburg between 1986 and 1993.

In Dublin's Northeast Inner City Shalev-Gerz created a doubling of place and memory in *Daedal(us)* (2003) that again initiated an interaction with place by its occupants. In an area rife with problems of heroin abuse that was undergoing a process of re-gentrification she photographed the facades of 20 buildings creating images that were projected on to facades in the same area. This layering of architecture created a moment of rearticulation of the familiar. Anthony Vidler⁶ discusses how familiar places can be made strange by the slightest change in perceptions: a conflation of representation of place and shifting perceptions took place in this powerful work. *Daedal(us)* invited spectators to become active agents in the recognition of each site, locating these displacements between site and perception into memory. Likewise, *Judengang* (1997-2000) investigated how individuals interact with their own locality. The Judengang is a condemned passage running beside a 19th Century Jewish cemetery in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin. Jewish people were not permitted to use the main, visible, entrance to the cemetery, instead this 400-by-

⁶ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, MIT Press 1992

7-metre passageway hidden behind a residential block was constructed in order that a less visible entrance could enable access. The strip of land situated between the cemetery wall and the backyards of buildings is still owned by the Berlin-Jewish community, however over time the residents of the houses have annexed this space in an ad hoc way. Shalev-Gerz highlights slivers of land that had lost a sense of tangible place, becoming ignored, or incorporated into adjoining demarcations of land. In this layering of remembrance on to forgetting, Shalev-Gerz echoes Gordon Matta-Clark's turn to left-over-spaces in New York in his *Reality Properties: Fake Estates* (1973). Over two years she met with the residents of the neighbouring block, asking what they would suggest for the future use of the narrow patch of land, filming each person talking in their home about their thoughts and perceptions of the Judengang. The process of communication here is as important as the final visual result: like all of Shalev-Gerz's work *Judengang* exists as a comma rather than a full stop. The intention was not to end the project with its display, but to initiate future conversations about this strip of land and to shift the contestation and ignorance of this site from the private to the public realm.

Differences between notions of locality are dependent on experience *and* perception. *Est-ce que ton image me regarde?* (2002) operates in the space between memory and history creating a double portrait of two personal histories from the same time and place. It is the story of two women: Charlotte Fuchs, a German who lived in Hanover during the Second World War, and Isabelle Choko, a Polish Jew who was sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp just outside the same city. Shalev-Gerz filmed each woman telling her experiences of living in the Hanover area during the Second World War, and then each was filmed watching the other's testimony. The first time that the pair meet is at the opening of the exhibition, although they meet virtually through the space of encounter Shalev-Gerz creates. Here, the spectator becomes the bridge between the two incomparable experiences. The site of Bergen-Belsen is now a heathland crossed by winding paths; in certain areas the land is raised - these are the mass graves marked with painful statistics of the thousands buried. The location has no visual representations of the horrors that took place; instead it is a blank space open to each person's projected memory. Shalev-Gerz too does not seek to mirror the past - she provides a space for engaged reflection. These are two women with very different experiences - one that tells a meta-history, the other a micro-history. The title of the work asks 'does you image reflect me?': neither woman could imagine herself in the other's position until the stories were told.

A sense of becoming through speaking can be seen throughout Shalev-Gerz's artistic practice. *The Portraits of Stories* (1998-2000) invited residents in three locations - Aubervilliers, a Parisian suburb, the Belsunce area of Marseilles and Skoghall, a small city in Sweden - a simple question: "what story should be told today?" Every story becomes a transmission of memory that not only communicates experience and perception but also brings together a collective act of listening, drawing together the experience and perceptions of people living in close physical proximity but -until this work- with little emotional connection. A portrait of three neighbourhoods is created through the conversations of its inhabitants. Anecdotes have veracity, whether they are based in fiction or fact, as they reflect the person telling the story and constitute a portrait of place that is personal, while revealing a far wider politics of power and visibility. In a choreographed rhythm the stories unfold, with each speaker merging into the next as the video projection shows two portraits layered upon each other as one story ends and another begins. A sense of doubling abounds in Shalev-Gerz's work, and these double

images become photographic element of the installation. Instead of creating simple portraits in her works, Shalev-Gerz reveals a double portrait, bring a contemporary and alternative approach to this traditional form of art. At one time the portrait revealed power embodied in a single individual - a king, nobility or in a figure deemed to be ideal. We become ourselves through interactions and dependence: by doubling the portrait the interactions, communications, and miscommunications that characterise human existence can be articulated. Speech and testimony are powerful channels of personal, local, regional and national identities. Shalev-Gerz describes how she orders each story, knowing the work is complete when the individual interviews “lock into a situation where I cannot move even one. It is like the procedure of painting where you build up a contrast.”⁷ The residents of each area came together to celebrate the launch of each portrait, creating a sense of commonality between people living in the same location for the first time. They continued to meet regularly, inviting the artist to join them, however she “refused to go. I said ‘now it is your project’.”⁸ This sense of a gift is present throughout her practice – she initiates relationships that form a sense of public space that is then left for others to continue.

Coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Shalev-Gerz was invited to create a work for the Parisian Town Hall, and she responded with a portrait of remembrance, titled *Between listening and telling. Last witnesses. Auschwitz 1945–2005* (2005). She was asked to work with 60 interviews where the last witnesses of the Holocaust spoke of their experiences before, during, and after the Second World War, as well as of how they lived today. The context for this work was a historical room in the Hotel de Ville, lined with ancient tapestries with a large chandelier in the centre. Shalev-Gerz developed a concept to create a space for listening to these testimonies spoken by the few people still alive who experienced the atrocities of the 20th Century. She designed four long tables with waved profiles running through the room, enabling 60 people to sit, watch and listen to 60 personal DVD players in their own space for reflection. Each contained a single unedited testimony by of an individual, with the longest nine hours and the shortest two, allowing an unmediated life story to be told by each person. Some talk directly of their experiences in the camps, others choose to talk of other things. Three large projections are also shown at the end of the room, confronting the visitor on entrance. These films are edited to the moments of silence in the spaces between words, turning small silences into extended moments. These are the moments where the speakers pause before telling something: feeling exudes from their faces, as eyes glisten with tears, eyebrows raise in disbelief, shoulders lift in question, and sometimes smiles cross the lips. It is impossible to watch without one’s own emotions being engaged. Within this silence people listen on headphones in a one- to-one confrontation with the lives of others. From time to time those listening to the recollections look to the large screens or to others listening, and in that moment become aware of the official nature of the context: titled *Between listening and telling* drew more than 1000 people a day to listen, inscribing these stories into the memory of individuals and the building itself. The design enabled not only people to listen, but also to watch others doing the same, and to see the present meeting the past through the emotional responses of the listeners and of the tellers.

This most recent work encapsulates the power of Shalev-Gerz’s communication through artwork. In this moment between *telling* and *listening* a new, contemporary moment of

⁷ conversation with author, 2004

⁸ *ibid.*

sharing the past and present becomes possible. Shalev-Gerz ignites a consciousness of memory in direct and indirect participants, creating active sites of remembrance that demand an engagement with not only those who are seen to speak, but also with those who choose to listen. Memory leaves a trace on the places that hold it, the people who engage with it, on the telling of history, and on the consciousness of the present. This is Shalev-Gerz's generous and wonderful gift to us: a call to pay attention to the space between listening and telling that we can forget so easily.

Lisa le Feuvre, London, 2005.