ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ

The Memory of a People to Come
A conversation between Esther Shalev Gerz and Jean-Christophe Royoux
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Jean-Christophe Royoux :
I have the impression that there are two schemes, two kinds of statement in your work, two modes of discourse that are radically differentiated one from the other. The one privileges - mainly through slide projections - a purely esthetic experience, a kind of epiphany of the mental image ; the other which functions like a set of stratagems to encourage the participation, even the collecting of the words of the "other person". This kind of double line in parallel strikes me as if the challenge in your work was to find the possibility of an intercrossing between these two schemes or forms or figures of discourse. Therefore, on the one hand a mental-projection-image which functions like the post- elaboration of a trace, of a memory. On the other hand - since *Oil on Stone* in 1980-83 - the form of the monument, which is the form by which the writing, the word and finally the voice manifest themselves in your work. Two parallel "trends" which although totally separated from one another seem at the same time to get together on the question of memory-commemoration, whether this is about re-elaborating a memory or whether it's about commemorating - which is the monument's purpose. Perhaps, we might talk about this proximity which is at the same time a distance...

Esther Shalev Gerz :
All of my work rests on two poles which are memory and the construction of memory ; but neither one or the other could be termed as "the archive". For me, it is obvious to join these two poles today because their distance lets me work on their complementarity in face of the inadequacy or insufficency I feel in front of an image. My series of slide projections that I have been developing for a long time, are made of images that come from places or events I have visited or experienced. I often work with images that I have taken a few years ago and when I "come back" to look at them, I use those that seem to me to be still alive.
It is not enough to take an image of something. And I wanted to work with the "inadequacy" of the image to stimulate the memory of something for each spectator. For me, the space of projection of the images is the space where the links are created between successive images. Sometimes there are five slides which are almost not linked, which do not resemble each other visually. This non resemblace and the interstitial space between the images are the elements necessary so that each spectator makes up a story. I think that, as in a film, we can - starting with three or four strong points, with a few frozen images in our memory - provoke another story. The story which links these images once again.

JCR Before the relating a tale in projection, that we might call a micro-tale, there is no trace of a specific story that you were looking to find. It is in the reading of the images themselves that you think that the spectator might eventually develop something like a subjective and personal memory...

ESG I think we are all "filled" with images. Each image that I have seen corresponds to an image that someone else has seen too. Each person can trigger off a new memory after having looked at five or ten images and forgotten a few others - because we only remember those which are already in our head. It's like a dream. In the dream we have the same elements as those experienced in life but they are organized differently. It is the relationship of images to each other which gives way to creation.

JCR If we take an interest in what these images represent, we can't be indifferent to the recurrence of forms that we might call archaic, metaphors for the degree zero, the first images - desert, land, immaculate nature - or even more symbolic images - churches, an indian sweat-lodge, walls of stones, things with a lot of connotation in the Jewish culture. All these images seem to recall the constitution of a symbolic territory that we are going to rediscover   with a particular emphasis on what I suggested earlier of identifying, as in the second issue in your work, in the *Portraits of Stories*   from Aubervilliers and Marseille. In the projections, simultaneously the tale, the memory and the dimension of the souvenir click together for each spectator in a subjective way and at the same time this opening of the imagination and of memory seems to me to be made possible by the fact that these imges are charged with a kind of pathos which functions like a call to the mnemonic : a very ancient memory, the first era of humankind, the prehistoric. Moreover, this pre- narrative dimension, this suggestion of a tale before the tale, is found in the specific tales that constitute the projection. In the sense that, while functioning like bits of history, put together like a succession of images which sends them all back to a kind of prehistoric time, they are relating nothing precise.

ESG My images are symbolic but for me they contain information. They come from deserts near where I lived, landscapes that I knew and of which I am a part without keeping hold of anything, without being able to recuperate these moments. For me , it'a almost about symbolizing "forgetting" . The important thing is that tiny moment of loss which is produced at the instant you take a photo. Leaving already means forgetting. The entire history of memory is first founded on forgetting and can re-emerge in another way thanks to the mnemonic systems I propose.

JCR At the same time what seems paradoxical to me in these projections, is that they seem to privilege something that is already in the order of "saying", in the order of the word, although being purely in the image. Finally, even when you are purely in the image, everything happens as if it wasn't the image that interests you but the passage of the image to something else...

ESG Because in the word there is something that doesn't exist in writing : that is the space between words. In the slide projections I try to recall that. By writing the words we lose this space which automatically becomes identical. This space between spoken words is something important which brings us to the human aspect. And in order to manage to create this imaginary space, I work with the reduced form of slides. The size of the images is 2,4 cm by 3,6 cm, that is to say, almost the size of the eye. And physically, by working on this scale, I "detach" myself,...the size is very important.

JCR In our previous converations, you said that you were against the image as witness, let's say against the documentary dimension of the image ; but you don't seem to have the same misgivings about what is the word, which on the contrary in *Portraits of Stories* is a very clear word, very limpid, very transparent, which says what it has to say without ambiguity or clouding things over. We learn something about the life of the "characters", about the many ways in which they think or have experienced things,without any manipulation. There is an immediateness in the understanding and transmission of these sayings. On the other hand you seem to challenge the images.

ESG Because they don't represent my feelings. When I found myself in the place where I took the photo, I knew that it would never give me that thing that I had felt, that I had experienced. And even in *Portraits of Stories,* it is not a documentary "word" because the minutes or the hours that I spent with each person only represents a few minutes or a few hours of their lives. The experience of the time spent with each inhabitant is vital. From this point of view , the video projection accompanied by double photographic portraits, is a documentary on the very impossibility of documenting this experience. The people who told their stories in the film could have told them to someone else in another manner. I am against the irreversible side to the image. We think that it is no longer changeable. I say that we can change it, and I work with or against this preconceived idea. With a flat image we cannot present a stone which is tridimensional. This inadequacy, this impossibility goes through the entire history of art. Moreover, since I have been an artist I dialogue with the forbidding of images. Why does the forbidding of images have such an important place in the Judaic, Musulman and Protestant cultures...which represent almost half of the planet ? The forbidding of the image is the forbidding of copying nature as it is. We can copy it only if we intervene in a creative and innovative way. We have forbidden the image because Moses said : God is in our memory, our mind, he is not there physically,. Memory is an accumulation, it is a practice.

JCR Your work is often about this relationship with memory, but we don't always understand why this question is so fundamental for you. If I listen to what you are saying, it would be because of this privilege given to saying and to writing. There would be - on the contrary to what is said in a very stereotyped way in our contemporary world - a privilege given to the saying over the seeing, therefore a privilege given to the word, to writing, to everything to do with language. Could we say that your manner of putting the question of memory in the center of your preoccupations is a manner of linking your artistic work to Jewish history and culture?

ESG I can't talk about privilege being given to the word over the image. I find neither writing nor images suffice alone. We need more elements to memorize or give sense, we need a whole mood or atmosphere. It is not possible to have "one" memory of one thing , "one" documentary look at something... Especially as each era brings a new organisation of memory with it, a new way of understanding how things exist together - these things which represent our Being in a certain way. And our Being today is expressed in this work at Aubervilliers for example. By showing a sharp sense of contemporary values and urgent issues, the participants in this project reveal a quality of the present which will be the point of departure for tomorrow's memory. The film gives shape to listening. Each person describes a position and this conjunciton of portraits makes a possible image of "society" appear. In fact, it is a one-way questioning within our society on what public space is today.   No one listens to the positions that each of us may take in everyday life because we still have not invented a system that would make this exchange possible.

The Judaic gods were the first to have spoken to the people, while the Egyptian gods only spoke amongst themselves. And today, whether we like it or not, those who make up this people and the people themselves speak amongst themselves. This is the continuity of that thought. What we need to retain today, can no longer be resumed or condensed into *one* word : one single text, one person, one single emblem. In a way memory has become democratic, has multiplied, in order to give each individual the possibility of a subjection appropriation of the truth of this story. I find that it's not so simple to make this kind work within the field of art in a society where everything can be bought or sold. For me one of the very important things in this project like those that I previously undertook, is the gift. People are mobilized by the gift. There is an economy of the gift. I ask people to give me something - their photos, their images, their words - without any concern for the reward. For two years now, I have been carrying out a project in Berlin where I ask the inhabitats of ten or so buildings to imagine an intervention in a walkway called the *Judengang* -the Jews' Walkway - which is located between where they live and the former Jewish cemetary of Prenslauer Berg. Starting from a set of forty four installation proposals, *one* solution will be decided on and made. An in situ proposal of realization will then be added to the simple gift of the word and image.

JCR If I understand you, therefore, you are establishing a relationship of necessity between memory and democracy?

ESG The relationship between the two of them is responsability. It springs from that place between memory and democracy in the same way that imagination springs between the senses and the intellect. Memory always contains the Other (L'Autre) which is what constitutes the basis of a democracy.

JCR For you, memory, responsability and democracy form a totally solidary and indissociable conceptual whole?

ESG Yes. This is a reality in which I have lived and that I find in my work. For me, in the most profound way, Judaism is humanism: it is the relationship between people that is essential and I believe in it. This relationship has been fundamental for surviving two thousand years without a country and with a geneology that has been broken up, interrupted, even annihilated, which seems almost incomprehensible. Because the Jews did not want to convert, the Jewish culture has been maintained by the memory of its own foundations.

JCR Finally what you are saying is that if we suppress all the elements that allow a people to federate itself - the territory, the language, etc what remains is the memory. With memory, there is always the possibility of refounding a community, of "being together". This is the experience of Judaism within the diaspora : no one speaks the same language, or shares the same lifestyle but in the final analysis there is something which binds, an ancient memory which suffices to maintain a living heritage.

ESG In Israel the people come from diverse origins and are not at all alike. Neither their morphology nor their customs, nor their languages...But nevertheless they manage to live together. For me, this is a miracle because we can clearly see that in Europe when you are a stranger you remain so for many generations to come...

JCR Do you consider that this is your own task, to try to clarify your relationship with the

theological, philosphical and humanisti philosophy that is Judaism ? Do you assume a specifically Jewish part in you work or do you consider that it is not necessary to underline it?

ESG Today, the artist is free, he or she can choose their commissioned work and commit herself to what she says and how she says it. This freedom was undoubtedly necessary to achieve. But if, for example, the Hamburg project was a success, it is because somone commissioned it. It is because the fomulation of the commission was very clear and very urgent. There was a danger that was still virtual at that moment and our role as artists was to incarnate this urgency into a signal : "beware...fascism is growing ! : give this urgency weight, significance. When I was a young artist, it was fundamental for me to find out who my "commissioner" was, with whom I was going to dialogue. In the history of Art in the Western world, it was often the church who was the commissioner. I myself needed to find a continuity to the Jewish culture which has led me today to something very contemporary, very clear, which helps me a lot in work and even forms my foundation.

JCR To return to my initial hypothesis of a double scheme of enounciation in your work, of a certain polarity, I have the feeling that the *Portraits of Stories* is a more accomplished work than the others because its crosses over and combines these two dimensions. In a way, the word takes shape ; the image is not dissociated from the word, the projection of the monument. We might say that the "beautiful" - if we say that the image part could be termed esthetic or esthetisism - is not separated from what is "right" and finally it's the listening quality that becomes "beautiful", it is no longer the colored shot, its the word itself. it seem that the condition of articulation of "beautiful" and "right" is your own retreat, the fact that you disappear after having been the indispensable mediator, so that the word appears, in the most genuine and the right way possible, the way most freed of any precaution. This practice of disappearance has been recurrent since the *Monument against Fascism,* : the monument must disappear to leave way for public discussion for which it is only the trigger or the pretext, in the same way that we might say with regard to *Portraits of Stories* that the quality of this work is also that we can forget the mediation, a little bit in the way Walter Benjamin fantasized in *The Narrator :* recreate conditions of an oral tale where finally the mediation was put on hold : where there would be immediate transmission. What's intriguing is the idea that the success of the artist is in a way paid for by his disappearance, that the success of art is that there is no more art. Moreover, you underline in a conversation this necessity to get away from art. Might we not say that the ambition of your art is to invent tactics to give the other person his own place?

ESG Making art disappear is too great a challenge but each time I try to deeply question it. I feel the necessity of moving away from art in order to come back to it differently. For me, the monument absolutely had to disappear. A monument cannot fight against injustice, it's up to us to do that...Israel is "full" of monuments. But in Judaism the monument is understood differently: it's about remembering the names of those who did us harm. Moreover, I only envisage the monument bearing the names of the persecutors, which for me is the sign of a much more responsible society. For the *Monument against Facism* made with Jochen Gerz, we only asked people for a signature, then in other ulterior works we asked them for a text or an image. Each time I tried to enrich the work. Often, people said to me, " no one is going to send you a photo, no one is going to touch the monument" and yet each project, even it is was channelled by
strict constraints of participation, has been a success. People want to participate, and they deeply want to be listened to. With *Portraits of Stories* At Aubervilliers and at

Marseille, I wanted both the image and the word. The participants talked for the length of time they wished. I tried to render what they said to me as best I could by simply removing the repetitions. I visited sixty different places chosen by the inhabitants.

In fact, the hardest thing was to find a form where I dicated nothing. There were people who wanted me to ask them questions, to tell them how, why etc.. And indeed I did have to give them the assurance that they could say whatever they wanted to. In the film, each person, through my listening, speaks to the world. But the video technique itself, is still too linear for me. I wanted to create an hyperimage, something tri-dimensional. These are the various links that interest me and which for me form the volume. The editing was very important for elaborating the contrasts, for bringing back, with one word, the memory of something which was said previously by someone else and that we can recognise as changed when we hear it again. This is the reason why I decided to systematically introduce the presence of someone else when someone was speaking into the editing of the film.

Today, a portrait can no longer be the portrait of one single person ; there have to be at least two : the one who speaks, the other who "listens". Once upon a time there were very few people on this earth : so to fill this void, so as not to be afraid, something invisble and always present has to be invented.

Nowadays, technology allows me to create a new ritual. Each of us has the means to speak out. This jumble, in slow motion, offsets and introduces a presence into the linear succession of contributions.

JCR If we return to the initially suggested hypothesis , this figure of two, of the dialogue is already produced in your work in the form of double issues... Is this listening ethic the real accomplishment of Emmanuel Lévinas for you?

ESG Yes, for me It's like Brancusi who made the *Endless Column* : for me, infinity is a contemporary form : six billion men, that is infinity. Lévinas said : " I am responsible for you and you are responsible for someone else" : He makes a construction comparable to that of Brancusi, which for me is the beauty of his thought and work.

JCR There are several differences between the *Monument against Fascism* which is undoubtedly the first real step on your artistic road and this new form or new practice of the monument, that is to say *Portraits of Stories,* which seems to me to be a reinvented form of monument. A monument is always something which allows the commemoration of an event, of a person ; even within the Jewish culture, the monument functions like a memory. Therefore, what is commemorated in the *Portraits of Stories* ? What is the guiding idea since all the people tell their stories and all these stories are never the same ? What strikes me is that there is no subject, no common subject. Reinvention means that we keep the idea of the monument but that we transform its usage, its practice. In the *Monument against Fascism,* the monument's accomplished practice is the public discussion that replaces the monument form itself. Today, in*Portraits of Stories ,* this form of discussion incarnates and pursues this idea of the reinvention of the monument. It seems to me that we are well within this issue of a new form of monument or of a new capacity, as Jean-François Lyotard might say, of "monumentation". But the only subject of these portraits is the place where they are speaking ; it is the territory they inhabit that is the true link. Which would mean that what is commemorated here is the territory in which this form, this project is converted into a reality : Aubervilliers, Belsunce, some Swedish village, etc.. As you say, the only thing these people have in common is that they are speaking and that they are all *present*, for that length of lime, through their word and in

the majority of cases through their image. For you, is this local dimension, in the much-discussed global era, central to this reinvention of transmission,
in order to deepen the notion of democracy ?

ESG Memory is always attached to the Other Person (l'Autre). *Portraits of Stories* at Aubervilliers shows very well how these people have a double identity, a dual history linked to a dual place. And I am very curious to see in the next actualisation of this project at Skoghall in Sweden - in a village where everyone is Swedish, where everyone knows everyone else, and has been born in the same village - what the stories of these people are going to be, what the portrait of this town will be through their words. This "portrait space" is perhaps the only real image that can be given to us by the town that is not a still-life photo...of a few roof tops. And this image changes all the time, it is not definitive once and for all.

JCR On the one hand, with the Hamburg monument, we are dealing with a logic which is resumed in the conclusion of a small text that called for the particiaption of the people in this project and which said *" No one will rise in our place against injustice"* . The monument clearly appeared as a first step towards a mobilization of another kind. But with this concept of the monument, we still remain within the grandiloquence of the great solemn declarations against injustice which are certainly necessary but are also somewhat impotent. Moreover, in other examples of the participation work that you have conceived, the place of people is always constrained by the rules of the game, by the questions you ask - I am thinking of the works entitled *The 20th Century* or *Reasons for Smiles* - and implied obviously very limited answers. On the contrary, in *Portraits of Stories ,* I think you have taken a step forward, a qualitative jump : it's not about being against this or that, you don't pay tribute to this or that and yet these words seem more dense, fuller. We have the feeling of having done something that is not only a work, a participation, we have the feeling that we are going beyond the framework of simple participation. If we situtate ourselves within the perspective of a contemporary art historian and that we think of certain conceptual art practices, knowing the rules of the game - the protocoles of experience - is a fundamental principle for understanding the work's challenges. But what strikes me is the oppositive in the protocol you have established for *Portriats of Stories* - that is to say the possibility for each protagonist to choose the place of filming , to tell a true or invented story, to replace his image by another, and even in relation to the initial, generic question that you ask everyone - *"What story should be told today ?"* - is that finally all this protocol appears almost secondary in comparison with the clarity and necessity of these stories. It has the vocation for disappearing. At the same time according to you, what makes me feel more involved in this film than looking at some televised documentary that might tell me something about an event that also concerns me?

ESG
First I think that as from the moment we participate in something, we create the possibilty of a memory that we might transmit to someone else. The difference between the film *Portraits of Stories* and TV , even if it is still perhaps insufficient, is the two and a half hour duration and the number of participants.   If there is stronger articulation with the spectator, it is linked to this multipliicy, to this accumulation of stories, to the duration that it produces. The people are not reduced to a little formated declaration as on live TV ; a place is really made so that people talk.
The quantity and diversity of the contributions invite the spectator to infinitely prolong this

succession of portraits. Moreover, the film's very materiality - a tape that I can give everyone and that I can look at whenever I want - potentially gives us a real and continual access every day of the year.

JCR In theory, what characterizes a monument is existing within view of everyone ina space that we define as public . What interests me, from the moment that this new type of monument is produced in the form of a video and therefore presented in a private space, is to know what might be the consequences on the monument form itself. To what extent can the ritual dimension, which is an essential dimension of the monument, function when the monument takes this form? Moreover, in the work you have initiated since the Hamburg monument, the conjunction of art and the media is a reality. Very concretely, without the debates and the support of the press, your work could not have existed ; with *Portraits of Stories* , you even seem to go as far as to suggest that the future of modes of representation is going to blend into a vast multimedia field. This art/media articulation, this fusion of two traditions, of two histories, of two practices which attempt to reinvent the one by the other or the one with the other would be the second criteria of success for *Portraits of Stories .* Now the central question raised by your work seems to be : "what makes art pertinent or efficient for reinventing public space ?". That is to say to what extent is art - as you now define it as a practice which is more and more identified with the media - pertinent for reinventing television ? What interests me in *Portraits of Stories* - is that finally it's not art in public space, but rather art seeking to make a certain public space exist.

ESG The public space has widened, it is no longer a street corner but also every means of communication and everything to do with spaces of transmission. I think that art reflects an existing state of things and reveals an actual transformation taking place. But soon the tools of communication will not be in one direction only. Television is changing, internet is going to give people the tools for committing themselves even more, to be responsible in the society in which they live and politics are going to have to change. In the world of art today, there isn't enough committment. The commission that I gave myself with *Portraits of Stories* was teh urgencyh of listening to those people : of kniwing what the portrait of Aubervilliers is a little bit better. Because I think that they are in a very creative situation. They give more than others a form to the present without being able to use their past to do so. What was also important in *Portraits of Stories* was using the *aura* of listening created by television, that is to say the optimal space today for being listened to. We listen to this "box" and I wanted to put those people inside it so that we listen to them too, although today no local television really yet exists that allows a continual discourse. Current television still suffers from the break-down linked to the history of the media and still has no access to the possibility of making an infinite circle of words and listening come alive.

JCR To completely achieve the logic of the gesture implied by *Portraits of Stories* a form of transmission, of local television would have to be invented ; inventing more than the form of these stories, a form of *return* of these strories to the territory from which they came.

ESG For me, that's clear and it's what I wish to do in Sweden. It's also for this reason that I have asked the town of Aubervilliers to distribute these portraits in places like the Town Hall. We are working on that , on the possibility of distribution in public places. In France there is still a hertzian problem. With the cable, I hope that at long last we are going to

make the kind of necesary space where this kind of project can really see the light of day.