

ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ

Spaces of perception: Esther Shalev-Gerz's *Daedal(us)*

*"It is at the same time true that the world is what we see and that, nonetheless, we must learn to see it – first in the sense that we must match this vision with knowledge, take possession of it, say what we and what seeing are, act therefore as if we knew nothing about it, as if we still had everything to learn."*¹

For the last 20 years Esther Shalev-Gerz 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 and where perception and knowledge inform each other. One of the difficulties with perception is that 'things' and their perception are two different concepts. A space sits between the two. This problem is doubled in the case of artwork. This space-between is analogous to the silences that punctuate words that enable language to exist - be it textual, aural, or visual. John Cage described silence as a balance to sound that clarifies structure, noting that "the world changes according to the place we place our attention. This process is addictive and energetic."² A silence is not empty: it leaves a trace or a gap where something once was or could be. To pay attention to moments between words – or objects - is to look afresh at familiar environments. Silence relies on the speech that succeeds it and through the silence enveloping the preceding speech meaning is created. The relationship between speech and silence is that of the visible and the invisible, the known and the assumed.

By occupying and interrogating this in-between space Shalev-Gerz takes possession of it through, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, "the virtues of language." Working through acts and encounters of communication, she creates works that question assumptions and highlight moments between understanding and perception. In 2003 she was invited by The Firestation Artists Studios to make a work in Dublin's Northeast Inner City: an isolated area in spite of its urban nature, and a location rife with problems of heroin abuse while at the same time undergoing a process of re-gentrification. Shalev-Gerz created a doubling of place on top of these contradictions in *Daedal(us)*, a work with process and communication at its core. Using memory to create a renewed sense of place, she drew

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, 1968

² John Cage, *For The Birds*, Marion Boyars, 1981

together individuals to consider their own location through a series of interruptions in space that created a maze like structure of repetition. The title *Daedal(us)* points the Greek myth of Daedalus, the Athenian architect and inventor who built King Minos an endless labyrinth, only to be later imprisoned within the structure himself with his son Icarus. Constructing wings from feathers and wax, the pair planned a much-feted escape via the skies – Daedalus made his escape, but his son flew too close to the sun, the wax melted, and he fell to the sea. The title also of course evokes James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus who repeatedly wanders Dublin's streets; like the mythical Daedalus he is tied to the structures of place, desiring escape. Robert Smithson, in his writings, recalled Brancusi's sketch of Joyce as a 'spiral ear' that "suggests both a visual and aural scale, or in other words it indicates a sense of scale that resonates in the eye and the ear at the same time."³ Like the silence, this space between sound and vision operates as a punctuation point for engagement: in Shalev-Gerz's work the space is that of the familiar layered upon itself in a new configuration.

Like all of Shalev-Gerz's work, *Daedal(us)* develops over time, initiating a series of long-term relationships. Wherever she makes a work she immerses herself in an area, choosing to mine the human relationships that create a sense of place. In this project Shalev-Gerz, like Stephen Daedalus, traversed the streets of the area getting to know not just the architecture and topology, but also its occupants. An unfamiliar woman wandering with an expensive camera in an area with many drug-dealers will not be a commonplace sight, and in order to negotiate this relationship Shalev-Gerz was required to engage with people as she made her way through the network of neighbourhood streets. Working with Liz Burns of the Firestation Artists Studios she conversed with many people, gaining an impression of how they felt about their area, with many telling of the economic, sociological and architectural changes that had taken place. Conversation and the telling of stories is a characteristic of Shalev-Gerz's practice, with works such as *White Out* (2002), *The Portraits of Stories* (1998-2000), *First Generation* (2004), and *Between listening and telling. Last witnesses. Auschwitz 1945– 2005* (2005) providing a space for individuals to tell their experiences of their place in the world.

In this most recent work, *Between listening and telling. Last witnesses. Auschwitz 1945– 2005*, the space of silence is explicitly mined. Shalev-Gerz worked 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 Hôtel de Ville in Paris where the walls are lined with tapestries and a large chandelier sits in the centre. Shalev-Gerz developed a concept to create a space for listening to these testimonies and designed four long tables with wavy profiles that enabled 60 people to sit, watch and listen to 60 personal DVD players at their own pace of reflection. Each contained a single unedited testimony by of an individual, allowing an unmediated life-story to be told by each person. Three large projections are 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 pauses before the speakers tell 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. 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 spaces between language. The design enabled not only people

³ Robert Smithson: *Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam, University of California Press, 1996

to listen, but also allowed visitors to watch others doing the same: to see the present meeting the past through the emotional responses of the listeners and of the tellers. In the space between *telling* and *listening* a new, contemporary moment of sharing the past and present became possible.

From her research for *Daedal(us)* (always an essential element of her practice), Shalev-Gerz selected twenty facades of buildings in the Northeast Inner City that were photographed in colour. Each image was then captured on a glass positive plate, creating a black and white image that could be projected on to buildings at night while maintaining a strong visual presence. This way of working recalls the infancy of photography where heavy, bulky equipment and long exposures meant that creating a single view was a lengthy process that enabled a more detailed inspection of the landscape than had ever been possible through mere vision - rather like Joyce's inspection of a single day's activities in all of its minutiae in *Ulysses*. This new ability to halt time led many photographers to try to erase all temporal indications, but this was rarely possible. Others made the imperfections that time created a feature to emphasise the stillness of the image. Eadweard Muybridge, for example, worked with photography to describe many places (that culminated in a 360-degree panorama of San Francisco in 1877) before he turned to his famous studies of animal locomotion, making many images of waterfalls that appeared as ghostly glows. At this time photography was strongly linked to articulations of place - partly because buildings did not move as people did, allowing the long exposures to capture the image, but also because of photography's incredible descriptive ability. This was exemplified by Eugene Atget, who effectively worked as a visual anthropologist, producing thousands of images of Paris between 1895 and 1927 that he carefully indexed and reindexed in "a repetitive rhythm of accumulation."⁴ Often making repeat visits to photograph different aspects of a single building, Atget would by chance sometimes capture a ghostly movement as an individual moved before the lens. Looking across Atget's practice one can see him focussing on single points, such as shop windows, street signs or doorways, around which he articulated urban space, its representation, and inhabitation – echoes of which can be seen in Shalev-Gerz's Dublin project.

Having created a series of images of facades, Shalev-Gerz then required locations to project them from and to, which again required a personal negotiation. Once a person had granted permission to have a photograph taken *of* their house, a second person was needed to agree that their home could be projected *on*, and then a third that the projector could be installed in their home to provide a place for the image to be projected *from*. These propositions 'of', 'on' and 'from' speak loudly of how one might describe a relationship with a place. Some were reticent to install a projector, linking such an action to surveillance activities that would be unwelcome in an area where drug-sales took place. Nonetheless, once individuals engaged with the notion and intents of *Daedal(us)*, many agreed and no adverse consequences occurred – in fact it was an affirmation of local *ownership* of the area that took place. The projections themselves change over time: each one was visible as soon as night fell for an entire month, creating a level of impermanence to a project with a specific, temporary duration. The projected buildings themselves changed over the period, and towards the end a red glow, sending out a call to pay attention to the area, was filtered into the images. By re-representing urban space through photography a sense of place can be articulated, initiating a new, or revived,

⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *Photography's Discursive Spaces*, in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, 1985

closeness between the city and its inhabitants. To see a single location stopped in time, even within our contemporary technological moment, is to offer an opportunity to recognise the most familiar through its representation. *Daedal(us)* existed as an event that sat between fictional projection and a real, experienced space. This was emphasised when the projection-events themselves were photographed to become art objects to be displayed in art galleries and illustrated in catalogues, such as this very one. Each of these photographs depict not only the architectural displacement but also vulnerability of each image to the textures of each building that fed through to the layered representation of another facade. In this reworking Shalev-Gerz inserted cultural practice into the space of the everyday through yet another level of negotiation, representation and reworking of the real. By altering the familiar a space becomes open for recognition of place and for personal stories to be told.

In his book *Architectural Uncanny*⁵ Anthony Vidler discusses how familiar places can be made strange by the slightest change in perceptions. Such a change may well be based on an objective factual shift, but can also take place through imagination or belief systems. He quotes from Ernst Bloch's text *A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel* that describes how these generic fictions are constructed to create an eeriness not only in what one is reading, but also in one's 'real' life through a process of defamiliarisation. He explains: "something is uncanny – that is how it begins. But at the same time one must search for that remoter 'something' which is already at hand." That "remoter something" will be the familiar, and only through what is known can the unknown be recognised. This conflation of representation of place and shifting perception is key to *Daedal(us)*, which invites spectators to become active agents in the recognition of each site, locating displacements between site and perception into memory through an engagement in the space between the known and perceived.

Memory becomes a significant element of *Daedal(us)* when, over a period of some weeks and for a number of hours each night, the local environment is visibly transformed. Projected images of the front walls of buildings reappear unexpectedly in proximity to their original site but slightly relocated. These displacements call for re-identification of the buildings and treated sites, and reclamation of them in their new locations and encourage the telling of personal experiences of the area and its representations, bringing groups of people together who otherwise would have little desire to communicate, purely based on pre-configured assumptions. *Daedal(us)* made an opportunity for the world to be looked at differently. Notions of permanence and memory are central to Shalev-Gerz's practice explored in a number of works that include *First Generation*, a permanent video installation where the articulation of experience and the silences between words are made explicit. 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. Here, as with other works, the host organisation was asked to find people to work with creating 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

⁵ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, MIT Press 1992

make up of that group will reflect the *habitus* of the selector.

The invited people form another 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 listening to themselves replying to a set of questions that were also etched into the stone steps of the building housing the installation, posing the same questions to all that enter. The camera closely studies each person's face, showing the barely perceptible changes that occur as one listens to one's own words. 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. 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. 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, like *Daedal(us)*, the work is only visible after dark, creating 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.

First Generation, like *Daedal(us)*, turned to the silences in speech to enable a reflection of meaning and perception. This un-measurable location sparks the imagination, and enables a connection to be made between individuals and their environment. Shalev-Gerz presents us as viewers –whether through direct experience of the work installed in the Northeast Inner City, or indirectly through anecdote and documentation- with a challenge to take possession of location and redefine our perceptions and ourselves.

Lisa Le Feuvre, 2005