

ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ

The Work of the Image

MenschenDinge, the human aspect of objects. On the walls of the museum at Buchenwald, at the core of the five videos presented at the centre of the hall, objects are represented: Mess tins, chain bracelets, combs, slippers or rings. These objects are there to speak of those who lived and who died, between 1937 and 1945; they are there in their place, seemingly to represent their history. Straight away, Esther Shalev-Gerz dislocates the customary questions. Can one, and should one represent the horror of the concentration camps, innumerable voices continue to ask. In truth, the question is merely formal. Those who ask it already know the answer, which is actually on three levels: to represent is to show, and one cannot present an undertaking involving humiliation and dehumanisation to the human eye without making oneself an accomplice to it; to represent is to construct a story, and one cannot lend the rationality of a constructed story to extermination without making it acceptable. Finally, to represent is to take the side of the idolatrous; it is, once again, to prolong the crime against the people whose God has forbidden images. Also – according to some – it involves betraying the artistic modernity that has also abolished the futile pleasure of images for the very sake of art.

All these reasons are based on the same principle. They liken representation to the deception that serves as an object in its absence: a vision of maltreated, humiliated bodies that are no longer there to answer for their steady firmness, a fiction inappropriate to the singularity of the event, an idol that takes the place of the voice of the other. To represent is to be in place of something else, indeed it means lying in the face of the truth of things: such is the presupposition common to all this criticism. Esther Shalev-Gerz refutes it in two respects. On the one hand, the actual object is never there, and representation is all there is: words carried by the body, and images that present to us what these bodies are doing rather than what the words are saying. On the other hand there is never representation: all we deal with here is presence. Objects, with hands touching them, mouths talking about them, ears listening, images moving, eyes showing attentiveness to what is said or seen, and projectors that address these bodily signs to other eyes and other ears.

The two affirmations have to be kept interdependent. The thing is never there in person, and yet presence is all there is. We should not deceive ourselves as to the significance of the «monument against fascism», conceived with Jochen Gerz and driven under the soil in Harburg- Hamburg today. Since this monument was destined to disappear, some commentators suggested that the intention was to assign it to the politics of the unrepresentable according to which the absolute other – the invisible god but also the crime against his people – cannot be represented and must only be symbolized by signs of absence, the surest of which is complete disappearance. But the invisible monument is not a monument to absence. Quite the opposite, in fact. It signifies that the memory of the

horror, and the resolve to stop it from returning, only have their monument in the wills of those who exist in the here and now. These are the signatures of the wills which, by gradually covering parts of the column, have decided to progressively bury it. The monument is buried by those who take upon themselves the task that it symbolizes. Nor should we be misled about the «irreparable» to which Esther Shalev-Gerz has dedicated another work. For her, the irreparable is not the absolute crime or the irreducible trauma that smashes history in two and dooms us to the immemorial. On the contrary it creates a positive way of moving forward to the present. This other method of settling the relationship by fault or debt can be symbolized by the story which Asa, the Lapp, tells us in *White Out*. For years, her grandfather had been robbed by a postman who embezzled the pensions of the nomad breeders and used the spoils to build himself a nice house. One day, stricken with remorse, the postman wanted to return the money, but the grandfather refused restitution. The money had been taken, and the house built. What was done could not be undone. That means that something else has to be done. Non-compensation is a point of departure. The whole question is to know what to do afterwards, what to do now. Isabelle, the Polish Jewess, torn *in extremis* out of Bergen-Belsen from the death machine that had killed her father and mother, has spent half of her life no longer talking about it so she could live, and the other half talking about it so that those alive today would know about it. The irreparable does not forbid words, it modulates them differently. It does not forbid images. Rather, it obliges them to move and to explore new possibilities. The irreparable nature of what took place in no way obliges us to create monuments to absence and to silence. Absence and silence are there anyhow, in any given situation. The question is to know what the people of the present make of them – what they make of words that contain an experience or objects that contain a memory, and of the images that transmit that memory.

The denouncers of the image always set the stage in the same way: they turn the image into something before which one behaves passively and is already vanquished by its trick: a pretence mistaken for reality; an idol mistaken for the real God; a spectacle at which one is alienated; merchandise to which one sells one's soul. Quite simply, they treat people as imbeciles. This belief gives those who share it a high opinion of themselves: we are intelligent because the others are stupid. Esther Shalev-Gerz knows that the reverse of this is true: one is never intelligent except with the intelligence one grants to others – those to whom one speaks and those about whom one speaks. And to begin with, one has to contest the state of play. Because imposing the scenario that assumes that we are inertly planted in front of images is to have already won. We are not in front of the images; we are in the middle of them, just as they are in the middle of us. The question is to know how to circulate among them, and how to get them to circulate as well. Those who declare them impossible or forbidden since Auschwitz oppose the impiety or the illusions of the images to the power of the voice that instructs. But behind that voice there is always the voice of command, the one that knows when and for whom it has to speak or be silent. To ban the image in the name of memory is firstly to affirm one's desire to make people fall silent and make them obey.

It is to ignore that the image and the memory are work above all. Esther Shalev-Gerz thus objects to the over-simplistic opposition of the faithful voice and the idolatrous image. The word and the image are not two separate things. The voice is always that of a body that can see and be seen, addressing another body that can see and be seen. And the silence that interrupts, precedes or listens to it is not the refuge of the all-powerful thinking that is hidden from fools or voyeurs. On the contrary, it is the mark of her difficult task of converting one sensitive person into another sensitive person. Silence, in the films of

Esther Shalev Gerz, is never an empty space ; it is always an uneven landscape. In the pages of *Bonjour Cinéma* that inspired Deleuze and several others, Jean Epstein extolled the close-up which transforms a face into a landscape full of crevices and mounds, of vegetation and trickling water. The close-ups of Esther Shalev Gerz radicalize this topography of the face/landscape until they make the viewer feel slightly uneasy: is there not a suspicious aesthetic bias in offering us the face of the other in the form of these thicknesses, rednesses or hairinesses that animalize them in order to show the power of the mechanical eye and to bring back the intentionally personal expression to the grand impersonality of things? And for the spectators, is it not indecent to stare at these pieces of face offered in passing in the glass facade of *Première génération* like fish in an aquarium? Yet it is quite a different bias that animates these close-ups: in this eye that sometimes bulges, sometimes winks, in these folds and rednesses of skin, in these hands that pinch a cheek or these fingers being passed across lips, it is primarily thought at work inside the bodies: thought trying to speak, trying to understand, and forcing us to do so as well, even in the course of reflection.

No represented absence, nor any immediacy of presence. One is not in front of, nor in the place of – one is always *between*. The object has to be understood in two senses: *to be between* is to belong to a certain type of community, a constructed and precarious community that does not define itself in terms of shared identity but in terms of possible sharing. But that which is to be shared is itself caught within a sharing, travelling between two beings, two places, two acts. What can be termed the image is actually the movement of this translation. There are people who come from elsewhere – from another place, from a past where those alive today have not lived. This can be the hell of Auschwitz, it can be the Chile of the bloody counter-revolution. It can simply be the snow of Lapland. Those people speak. But they never speak simply of what they experienced "over there", elsewhere, in a different time. For validation of the word of a witness, especially of someone who has witnessed suffering, always means assigning to «the other» a properly defined place, the place of a person whose only use is to transmit the uniqueness of the information and its sensitive and immediate import to those who have the prerogative of judgment and the universal. Esther Shalev Gerz does not give voice to the witnesses of the past or of elsewhere, but to researchers who are at work in the here and now. She makes the ones who come from elsewhere speak of the present as they do of the past, of here as of there. She makes them speak about the way they have thought and arranged the relationship between one place and another, one time and another. But also the dispositifs that she constructs are themselves dispositifs that distend their words, and that subject them to representation of the conditions governing their listening and uttering.

Between speaking and listening: Esther Shalev-Gerz has used this title at least twice. She did so for the installation at the Hôtel de ville de Paris that was to present the memory of the camp survivors. That which is between speaking and listening is the image. But the image is not simply the visible. It is the dispositif within which the visible is caught. This dispositif makes two different roles visible. On the one hand, the visitors to the exhibition in Paris saw, on the monitors provided, the DVDs containing the testimony of those who survived. The visible thus enables a story to be transmitted. But the hall was also dominated by three projections that made them watch the same thing and something else at the same time: the same witnesses, in silence, caught in that concentration or hesitation that precedes any new spoken word – a silence which itself is filled by a multiplicity of signs – sighs, smiles, looks, blinks – that stage what is about to be said like the product of work. So far from amazement or idolatry, the visible image is the element in

a story. But this story itself consists of echoes between various instances. Between the word that relates and the ear that gains information, it shows us, on the faces, the movement of attentive thought calling for attention. It is not simply a vehicle for transmitting testimony; it is the «portrait of a story». The expression chosen for an exhibition at Aubervilliers, in the Paris suburbs, is odd. The distance between the two terms defines what one can call a dissensus, that is, a confrontation between the modes of the sensitive. This confrontation distances us from the epiphany of absence or from the shock of the unrepresentable, both of which mark works that speak to us of extermination. To talk of portraying a story is to subtract each of the two terms from their obviousness. The portrait does not deliver the immediacy of presence, it distends it into a story, that is, a certain set of actions. Conversely, instead of being delivered as is, the story is only perceived through the bodies that think it, say it or hear it. There are only thinking bodies with their experience or with that transmitted by other thinking bodies.

The form of equality thus defined challenges the concept of there being a specific artistic dispositif to speak of extermination, and of that alone. The dispositif of the interval between speaking and listening is not only adapted to the history of the great events or great traumas of a century. What is valid for the memory of Auschwitz or for that of immigrants whom political repression or the hope of a better life brought to Sweden from Chile, Turkey or wherever else, is also valid for the less tragic story of Asa, the Lapp woman. « Between speaking and listening» was already the title of the video installation that told the story of a voyage between two identities, between the daughter of Sami-speaking reindeer breeders and the well-integrated Swedish girl from Stockholm. Everything there was between Asa and herself: between the plain room in Stockholm where the dynamic, well-established city girl, claiming her double culture in eloquent gestures and the Lapp country— where the face of the same Asa, shown at the foreground and almost given an native authenticity by the combination of rosy cheeks and the exuberant vegetation of the scenery, listened to its own words like an attentive, surprised stranger. And one still has to remember that the words themselves were already a form of listening, for she was not simply recounting her experience. She was reacting to a choice of quotations, of those travellers accustomed to project stereotypes such as "noble savage" and the dreams of primitive communism onto remote peoples.

This relationship of self to self is the zero degree of this dispositif. This has to be properly understood. The relationship of Asa speaking to Asa listening tells us this: the *two* is original. Some oppose to the indifferent, egalitarian circulation, of the images the stop on the face that bears witness to implacable otherness. Esther Shalev makes this face move; she places it in a questioning situation, a situation apart from itself. There is not only the fact that the man or woman speaking are listening to themselves. In its very immediacy the face is always double: The look reflects a vision, and the pursed lips retain a thought. It is from this initial core of otherness onwards that the circulation of images creates community in ever-widening circles. In Hanover, a few leagues from the death camp of Bergen-Belsen, where the traces of the past have worn out, these are two faces that have been linked: Isabelle Choko, the Jewess who as a child knew the ghetto of Lodz before ending up at Bergen-Belsen, is the one who speaks; Charlotte Fuchs, former actress, embodying left-wing German culture between the wars, is the one who listens; she herself speaks in front of the walls covered with enigmatic figures by Oscar Schlemmer, emblems of the progressive Germany vanquished by Nazi madness; sometimes the figure of the woman listening, now tense with attentiveness and now marble-like, masks the one that is speaking. *Is your image*

watching me? is the question being asked by this installation. At Botyrka, in the Stockholm suburbs, the circle is widened even further for the permanent video installation *First Generation*: these are a few dozen immigrants who answered the question of knowing what they lost and won by coming here, that which they have given and received. And they are the ones who listen to each other and offer their faces to the gaze of the visitor – or rather a fragment of landscape that their attention stretches or folds. The faces lie between the outside that one passes or the within where one learns about the stories. Between those who pass and those who enter, between those whose voices and faces are exposed there and those who, in turn, make the move from looking to listening – and perhaps to new words – it is always the same community that is weaving itself here: a community of people that are between here and another place, between now and another time, between the complementary and disjointed gestures of what is spoken, heard and seen. The present tendencies encourage us to consider other cultures and see, in art, a means of introducing us to them. But things would be simple (and not all that interesting for an artist) if it was only about learning to know and respect the difference. This involves something more serious, where the practice of art today is on the other hand directly interested: it involves researching the very relationship between the apparent and the different, showing how the other is similar, and carries the same capacities of speaking and listening, but also, conversely, how the same is itself other, caught up in the obligation of distance and interval.

In *MenschenDinge* the rules of the game are different, but the ultimate principle is identical. No former inmate of Buchenwald recount their memories of camp life here. The five people who speak are functionaries of the museum, or associated with its work. We see them talking but they do not listen to themselves talking nor are they listened by the others. Everything is played out between their words and the objects they talk about, which they show on the table or take in their hands. It is initially to things that the power of the interval, of circulation and of transformation is applied. These things are the objects – twenty or thirty of them – among all those discovered while excavating the camp. They are objects that belonged to the inmates. Some of them bear signatures or marks of identity. But they are also singular objects that underground labour has recuperated, transformed, and diverted from the originally destined camp use. The thin section of wire discovered has been twisted to form a ring; the ruler intended for use by workers has been carefully carved into a comb by a makeshift tool; or a section of it transformed into a knife-handle. A gourd has been cut to form a plate or a bowl; a piece of carefully bent aluminium was used as a mirror; a makeshift piece of metal has been twisted to form a broken toothbrush; a French-army mess tin has had its top section removed, and a brick has been inserted and the handle adjusted to form an instrument for ironing clothes. A spider shaped brooch has been encrusted with bits of glass jewellery; goblets have been chiselled; on one of them, an inscription in Russian makes its ownership clear: « Look for your own bowl and leave mine alone, gipsy ». Engraved on another are a lucky horseshoe symbol, a pierced heart symbolizing love, and an anchor symbolizing freedom. And that instrument and symbol of incarceration par excellence, barbed wire, is also given a new use, rolled around a piece of copper connected to a salvaged item to create a thermo plunger enabling small amounts of water to be heated up.

We are indeed far from those piles of shoes, photographs of which are sometimes aimed at creating a metonymy of the death machine. Testifying to suffering and mass death is not the issue here. One should not forget that even though Buchenwald had no gas chambers and was

not part of the "Final Solution" program it also was a death camp. Fifty-six thousand people died at Buchenwald or at the sub-camps connected with it. But it is not the memory of the dead that Esther Shalev-Gerz is telling us about here, it is the memory of the living. As in the dispositifs of speaking and listening, this memory involves a process. These dumb objects have to be made to speak. But here a distinction must be made. Historians have taught us to value these objects as «dumb witnesses» to the life of men, and to counter the learned verbal responses with their truthfulness. The artist turns this around, however: the objects here are not testifying to a condition, they are not telling us what they have lived through but what they have done. They are thus testifying to a capacity which is actually of the same type they testify to in other installations, the applied word, or the attentive faces of those who are anonymous. The displayed ingenuity of the artisans who made these objects will certainly remind some of the "do-it-yourself" celebrated by Lévi-Strauss, or the «arts of doing» so dear to Michel de Certeau. And indeed, Esther Shalev-Gerz is telling us about the capacity of those who forged these items. Yet the objects are not only the results of the inventive capacity of their nameless creators. They are practical and emblematic affirmations of that capacity in the face of a machine that dehumanized and exterminated. In this regard, the makeshift comb is no different from the incrustated bracelet, and the barbed-wire electrical device no different from the mirror. We do not have, on the one hand, the necessities of life and, on the other, care about finery through which one affirms oneself above mere biological existence. The manner of manufacture cannot be separated from the affirmation of a manner of being, or of a style of existing in the strongest sense.

One then understands that Harry, the historian, can be enthusiastic when he shows us something « sensational »: a broken toothbrush repaired by an expert and skilful hand, through adjustment of the rivets from a piece of salvaged aluminum. The person who made that could have been dead on the following day, and yet he still took the trouble to clean his teeth with an appropriate instrument. One could think that this artist put into his work the summarized concepts of *L'Espèce humaine* by Robert Antelme, who himself transited through Buchenwald before being sent on to the factory in Gandersheim: when the enemy has programmed your physical death and your moral degradation at the same time, the two can no longer be separated. Giving oneself the means to continue living and affirming a necessary relationship with one's image go hand in hand. That is why people queued up for the moment they encountered the « piece of bright solitude » provided by this mirror, to look once more at this face that the enemy wanted to make hideous for each individual, and for all the others¹. It is true that certain people were terrified of this and no longer wanted to see their face, marked by the effects of the dehumanization machinery. But others in their turn practiced the art of looking in the same way as those who thought of people who were absent, people who were back home waiting for them. And as for that makeshift smoothing iron, it initially confused the researchers but, thanks to another book, they finally understood its purpose: it was certainly not destined for providing striped clothing with neat creases. It was used for killing parasites that caused epidemics. Life is never reduced to "bare life", to mere biological necessity. Nor can one make any division between the necessary and the accessory. That is also what those metal calendars testify to, where only the months are marked. The days may have all been the same, but that did not prevent people from retaining control over time and taking care to keep their handwriting elegant.

¹ Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine*, Gallimard, 1957, p. 61.

Objects do indeed speak in the way that writers do. They speak of the art that produced them: an ingenious art of making that is inseparable from an art of living. And in this sense there is no solution of continuity between the artist who made the spoon, the comb or the smoothing iron for his own use and those «true» artists who used their knowledge of drawing to leave us their testimonies to camp life: Paul Goyard, whose drawings are preserved at Buchenwald; Boris Taslitzky, whose sketches, published by Aragon in 1945, will be on display in Paris this summer (2006); and Walter Spitzer, Léon Delarbre, Henri Pieck, Karl Schulz and a certain number of others whose work has been revived in the recent film by Christophe Cognet². They, too, must have procured their artistic means clandestinely: paper salvaged from factory flyers, used rags, thrown-away envelopes or, as reported by Léon Delarbre, the paper surrounding the asbestos insulation for pipes. And if they sketched the sinister assemblies on the Appellhof, the piles of dead bodies in the « small camp», the hanged people, the carts of corpses taken to the crematoria or the living dead of the *Revier*, they are also attached to painting portraits of friends or strangers as they would have been able to paint them elsewhere: like those portraits done by Boris Taslitzky that represent intellectuals, journalists and artists, their looks determined by their thoughts and their art, rather than inmates bearing the stigmata of exhaustion, hunger and disease. That is why the initial question of the museum staff was quickly resolved: should they piously gather up and exhibit all the rubbish, the collections of buttons, the coins, the mess tins or the rusty spoons from the heap of detritus left behind when the camp closed? A museum is certainly not a garbage bin – and this is not about garbage, it is about the production of an art of living and doing. However, once that question was settled, the opposite question arose: is it legitimate today to make art out of the death camps, with the histories of those who died or came back from them, and with the traces remaining of them? Art can also be seen as artifice devoted to pleasure, and numerous voices affirm that either one would be indecent here. One certainly welcomes the artists among the inmates who used their art of line and composition for their drawings of camp life. One is even inclined to admit that they sometimes sensed a secret affinity between the disembodiment of the mass of tortured bodies and the actual birth of the artistic form like Music at Dachau «blinded by the hallucinatory grandeur of these fields of corpses like patches of white snow, flashes of silver on mountains or white seagulls perched on a lagoon », or, like Boris Taslitzky, gripped by the kaleidoscope of moving aspects presented by the Gehenna of the « little camp ». But today it is more difficult to admit wanting to make works with the combs, the bowls and the spoons of the inmates salvaged from a rubbish dump. Even those who gather up the objects, clean them, archive them, display them or organize exhibitions devoted to them ask themselves, like museum director Volkhard Knigge, in front of the camera of Esther Shalev-Gerz: does the very aura of these objects, and the manner in which, according to the Benjamin definition, they present us with something so far away as if for the very first time, place them beyond art?

The answer caught in a singular dialectic. Wanting to keep them apart or beyond art is to turn them into relics or fetishes: sacred objects petrified in their relationship with the death machine. And the merchandise is always close to the fetish: as soon as the presence of these objects is necessary to places of remembrance, those who have none have to buy them, and the rusty spoons of the dead become objects of financial value too. To spare them the status of being objects oscillating between relic and merchandise, they have to be made legible. But to make them legible is not only to identify them. Or rather,

² Christophe Cognet, « Quand nos yeux sont fermés. L'art clandestin à Buchenwald », La Huit Production, 2005.

identification in itself cannot be separated from an artist's work: a work of research and imagination combined which makes that Russian inscription on the bowl talk. The property is affirmed, but ambiguity remains with regard to the « gipsy » who could be the person who signed the inscription as easily as the person it was addressed to, real or imaginary; a story of parallel destinies that takes shape around this bowl bearing two names of «owners»: the French name of an inmate who survived, the Czech name of another who came from the East and died in Bergen-Belsen. To deny these objects simple aesthetic pleasure or devotion in the face of the victims of an irreparable crime is to entrust them to historian imagination. But to make them legible is to exhibit them as the product of art of doing and the art of living of those who diverted decorated and signed them. It is this art, above all, to which we should render homage. And that is why it is legitimate to entrust them *among others* to an artist of today, Esther Shalev-Gerz.

Among others: an artist among other artists: those who have made objects, those who deal with archiving or exhibiting them, those who will have new eyes and ears for the proposed installation. But also an artist whose entire work is to extract objects, images and voices from their solitude, to multiply the potential they contain through circulation. The law of two, that of the interval and the shift, govern the dispositif invented here by Esther Shalev-Gerz as rigorously as her previous installations. This is why she does not exhibit objects but their multiplied images. Twenty five images of objects of which each is a double image: the same smoothing iron seen from inside or from outside, the same bowl but from two different angles, the same slipper front and back. Here the artist seems to be precisely contravening the commandment of Robert Bresson to the film director «Do not show all the sides of things»³. It is precisely at the expense of keeping «sections of nature» captured by the camera separate that the director feels he is making cinema a language. Esther Shalev-Gerz also wants images to obey the law of language, that of the interval. And that is why she always puts in two instead of one. But she also has a different understanding of the relationship between art and language. Just as one makes an image with other images, one makes art with another art by bringing out in a given material –human words or inanimate object – that which is already art within it, and that which is already the product of research. If it is necessary to show one side and then the other, it is because «montage» is not the exclusive art of the filmmaker. Showing «both sides» of an object is to sensitize the montage already staged by the camp artist to divert the material or the object from its destination: the slipper stolen from the bedcover and the cardboard used for its makeshift sole, the rusty spoon and its handle transformed into a knife, etc. But it is not simply a matter of education. To show this montage is to show that an object, an image or a word is always in flux, spanned between past and future, between an invention and the new invention it requires to whoever it holds in its hand, to whoever looks at the image. Or rather the image of art, the active image, is not the visible form that reproduces an object. It is always between two forms. It is the work that is created in their interval.

Images never occur alone and nor do objects. The photographs on the walls do not show to us things: these are presentations of things, of hands holding them and manipulating them. The rather over-«artistic» fist impression of this chiselled bowl that resembles some rare item excavated from an Etruscan tomb, and of this other bowl held in the palm of a hand almost like a chalice, is that of an affirmative link between the present and the past, between today's attentive gesture and that of yesterday, a linked affirmed as always from

³ Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, Folio/Gallimard, p. 104.

a distance, sensitive here between the brilliance of the shiny metal and the pink and rough dullness of the fingers. Things do not speak unless presented and transformed by a new montage, by a new thought and bodily process. The five video interviews visible from the long wavy bench at the centre of the room make these hands talk, and give them a thinking body that makes objects speak. The hands of Harry the historian mimic the fragility of the long-enigmatic object that he is holding in his hand – a metal hinge which turned out to be a section taken from a metal identity documents case. At another moment they become animated as they show that part of a comb – the creation of which was tantamount to an act of sabotage – dancing before our eyes, or to demonstrate what is « sensational » about the strip of aluminium riveted to the broken toothbrush. Between the art of the inmates and that of the artist there is that art of the lesson about things of the historian or the archaeologist. But this lesson about things doesn't hesitate to doubt its appropriateness: at the end of the passionate gymnastics where his hands «made objects speak», the historian wonders whether words and things should not be separated, whether magnifying glasses should not be placed next to the objects and explanations should be made elsewhere.

A reason to separate is always counterbalanced with a reason to reunite: there is little to see here, says Ronald the archaeologist on the digging site. One has to use imagination to render objects legible. And that is what he does – in his office, repeatedly turning this bowl with its two names and reconstructing the true story of these two owners – who may never have met each other – by their inscriptions on the metal. Not too much art, says Knigge. This is not about causing pious admiration for the objects, but about fighting the second negation, that of negligence, by linking our present with that other present. That is he why he speaks without objects in his hands but in the cellar which is all that remains of the original concentration-camp buildings. Linking and unlinking are the two complementary and contradictory operations summed up by the attitudes of Rose-Marie the restorer and Naomi the photographer. Here you can touch history, says the first, manipulating objects at the heart of her laboratory. And we believe her all the more because for quite a while the camera only shows us her hands demonstrating the art that went into the production of the spoon, the slipper or the spider broach before returning briefly to her face, then leaving it again as she concentrates on a comb. And what she says fits completely with the artistic task represented by safeguarding and archiving objects. This actually gives rise to a different method of transmission. Schoolchildren come to work there: cleaning, labelling, and describing on the register where everything one knows about the objects has been noted down. In its way this register is also a work of art, divided up into boxes containing drawings of each object with a note of its dimensions – each object all the way to the one-pfennig coin alike any other, or the odd button. Pupils who have adopted objects in this way have even written their name in the register and added their memory-artist signature. It is not with respect to a simple document that the photos or the video make us admire the orderliness of the pages. One gets the feeling that the individualized and doubled layout of the photos, like the echo between the image and the word used in Esther Shalev-Gerz's installation, is also a part of the continuity of this meticulous art of registering and documenting.

But it also takes into account the suspensive questioning of Naomi, the photographer who is also an Israeli. Indeed it was in Israel, at Yad Vashem , that she first started to archive the objects from the camps and to photograph them according to a Bressonesque principle of separation. She actually wanted to tear them out of their universe of night and fog, and deprive them of all sacred- object status at the same time. So she imagined

photographing them neutrally against a white backdrop, as in official mug shots. The video presents her in front of series obtained in this way: broken spectacles or shaving-brushes. But she also tells us about the problem she faces when filming objects in contact with the body. She tells us this using words but also using her hands, which strangely mimic the contact of the shaving-brush with stubbly skin. But this closeness is followed with the concern of allowing objects to maintain their distance and their enigma. They are like sea shells in the middle of which one walks upon sand. They yield no answer. As with the invisible monument, the answers lie within ourselves. One has to invent a way of being with them which is also a way of placing them among us, or constitute a community of intervals. To talk about the objects of Buchenwald requires the same art needed to talk about going from Chile or Turkey, to the suburbs of Stockholm, Ceylon or Mauritania, to the suburbs of Paris. It is always a matter of knowing how to behave with objects, how to behave with the images and the voices, and how to treat the fact of being between. Naomi explains to us how the relationship with these objects has developed a sense of tolerance within her. This must not be understood simply as a good and moral deed produced by an artistic work. Clearly the two cannot be separated. Certain people wish that art would indelibly inscribe the memory of the horrors of the century. Others want it to help people today to understand each other in the diversity of their cultures. Others explain to us that art today produces – or should produce – new forms of social relationships for everyone, rather than works for art-lovers. But art does not work *in order to* make contemporaries responsible with regard to the past, or *in order to* construct better relations between different communities. It is an exercise of such responsibility or of such construction, insofar as it takes in its own equality the different kinds of art that produce objects and images, of resistance and of memory. It does not disintegrate into social relations. It constructs effective forms of community: communities between objects and images, between images and voices, between faces and words that weave relationships between pasts and a present, between faraway spaces and a place of exhibition. These communities only assemble at the cost of separating, and only get closer at the cost of creating distance. But separating and creating distance also means placing words, images and things into a wider community of acts of thought and creation, of speaking and listening which call and respond to each other. It does not involve developing “correct” feelings among spectators but inviting them to enter the continuous process of creation of these sensitive communities. It does not involve proclaiming that everyone is an artist, but saying that art lives off art that it alternately transforms and creates.

« Separated, we are together ». The quotation is from Mallarmé, from the prose poem entitled *Le nénuphar blanc* (“*The White Water-Lily*”). Sometimes one feels it applies to an art enclosed in the glacial solitude of the oeuvre, dealing with the refined sensations of aesthetes for the use of those same aesthetes. The installations by Esther Shalev-Gerz instead show that she finds her full application in the case of an art that sets out to revive today the memory of collective stories and tragedies. The solitude of the artwork is always the construction of a sensitive community that is prolonged beyond itself by creating wider forms of community. But the opposite is just as true. Together, we are separated. There is no living or total work of art that would identify with a large community united by a common breath or a common vision. The only communities that are worthwhile are partial and always unpredictable, and they are constructed in the attention given by an ear to a voice, by a look to an image, a thought to an object, in the exchange of words and attentive listening to people's histories, in the multiplication of small inventions, always threatened with being lost in the banality of objects or of images if new inventions do not awaken the potential that is inside them. This is not a matter of “correct” feelings. It is the

matter of art, i.e. of work and of research, to lend singular form to the ability to do and to say, that belongs to all.

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