

# ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ

## **You, Me, The Other & The City**

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DAEDAL(us) A WORK COMPRISING LARGE SCALE PROJECTIONS BY PARIS BASED ARTIST ESTHER SHALEV-GERZ TOOK PLACE RECENTLY AMONGST THE STREETS AND HOUSES OF DUBLIN'S NORTHEAST INNER CITY. THE ARTIST TALKS TO THE VISUAL ARTISTS' NEWS SHEET ABOUT THIS PROJECT AND HER COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO ART MAKING.

For over 20 years Esther Shalev-Gerz's work has centred on interventions in public space, taking form in collaboration and exchange with the audience. Her installations and photographic works raise questions on collective memory and its interaction with personal history. Last year, the artist was invited by the Fire Station Artists' Studios in association with curator Brigid Harte, to conceive a project for Dublin's north inner city.

Daedal(us) was funded via The Arts Council's Special Project Scheme 2002, Dublin City Council and sponsorship from the Irish Financial Services Centre. As the title suggests, both the Greek mythological character Daedalus, the maker of mazes and wanderings of Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, were starting points for the work. But also, as signalled by the (us) in the title, is the involvement of the residents of this area in creating an opportunity for locals and visitors to recognise the value of this neighbourhood

**Jason Oakley:** How did the project come about?

**ESG:** Brigid Harte saw a work of mine called The Portraits of Stories, (1998-99) that I realised in Aubervilliers, a suburb of Paris in the northern part of the city. 80,000 people live in this place and almost 80% of them are recent immigrants. People don't stay there long. The place is in flux, always changing. Parisians do not appreciate the area very much.

For the work I asked 65 people who lived there, "what story would you tell today?" They were free to tell what they wanted and they could dictate to me how I should film them. I allowed them to make decisions and to decide how they wanted to appear in the video. By creating an interwoven criss-crossing during the editing, I have constructed a special kind of arrangement for these Portraits of Stories. The projected image contains two people at any given moment, until a total of 65 people have spoken for a duration of two and a half hours. The question of what is a portrait today is a recurring theme in my work.

Historically the portrait, as we know, depicts only one, the king. For me the contemporary portrait is two. It's the other and me. As Brigid thought it would be important that I come to Dublin she connected me with the Firestation Studios whose former director, Tony Sheehan, invited me to come to the North Inner City.

**JO:** What were your impressions of the area?

**ESG:** Terry Fagan and Mick Rafferty gave me a tour of the North Inner City and I was literally knocked down by the powerful layering of history and the mutating present in this place. It's the only place I know that has a monument for children who have died from heroin. When one arrives there from another part of Dublin, it becomes slowly emptier and emptier. All this moved me and inspired me profoundly. The area is beautifully filled with contrasts. You have this huge stadium with little buildings next to it. Some points of view are spectacular in terms of architecture. I was really stimulated while walking through there.

**JO:** Could you briefly describe the form of the work you produced in response to this?

**ESG:** I decided to photograph 20 facades of houses and shops, and then I 'displaced' them by projecting them in the close vicinity onto other facades and gable houses. I therefore created a new kind of maze-like journey where the inhabitants or visitors have to go and walk around to find where each house has reappeared. The projectors are timed to be switched on between 6pm and 11pm every day for a month. So the work is about light and night. I have done works with those elements before. I find that darkness creates a space for dream, like cinema.

In alternate weeks, in a pulse-like motion, the images will appear in black and white and then in red. I chose to use red and white as a kind of signal. The area needs attention. In fact it needs the only thing that makes art and other things work, i.e. love. It's the only motor that crystallises beauty in things. I do believe this after 25 years of working as an artist. I've created a maze within a maze. It's a maze in history, which goes back and forth in time. It is a maze in our attitudes and how we avoid certain places and about how we can bring people back to those places. But the most appreciated were the conversations that I had with people. This was a very important part of the project for me. If people allow me to work with them, that's grand, but if they don't, we still have had a good conversation. The project takes its name from Daedalus the maker of the maze in Greek mythology, whom James Joyce famously references by naming the hero of Ulysses Stephen Daedalus. As we read Joyce's Ulysses we follow Stephen Daedalus' wanderings through the streets of Dublin. The Daedal(us) project occurs among some of these byways.

Just as Joyce has his protagonists, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Daedalus, travel the streets of Dublin so that he himself, while living abroad, might remember his hometown and be re-familiarised with it, the Daedal(us) project similarly requires its spectators to wander the streets of the inner city core and (re)familiarise themselves with it. In a district that is undergoing rapid transformation and regeneration, the wandering, remembering, and reclaiming may produce new kinds of maze-like journeys and future memories.

And you know that every time I conduct a project, just before completion I become aware of some autobiographic aspect to it. This project began with the idea of Joyce writing

about Dublin when he was abroad. I, myself, was born in one place and lived in so many different places. I've moved so much that I am on the move all the time. People always ask me, "so where is your home?" I think the distance that you have from your home crystallises inventiveness and creativity.

**JO:** Tell us more about the process of negotiation in realising the project.

**ESG:** The whole project actually involves giving power to three people for each image. First we had to ask someone's permission to take a photograph of his or her house. Then we had to ask someone's permission to project a photograph of this image on their house. Thirdly we needed to obtain other's consent to host the projectors. To all these people we needed to explain the project so it would be acceptable. These people allowed me to realise the work. I did the images.

For each image at least three people have to go through what I call 'the ritual of Art'. It is one of our social rituals whereby we include or exclude people from our society. Bringing art to this place is my way of including people in this social ritual.

**JO:** Was there any special process involved in making photographic images for large-scale projection?

**ESG:** Art is also a craft. The image is important, so I used photographs that I took with a very good camera to create what are called 'gobos' which are circular glass transparencies attached directly to the projector lens. I worked in Paris with a specialist in digital image retouching - a friend of mine who I have worked with for 12 years. We touched-up the image to allow the projection light to go through without destroying the structure of the image. An unmodified image wouldn't allow enough light through. The converging verticals in the photographs of the buildings were also corrected. It's not a process of beautification but more to clarify what is already there.

**JO:** What was the response on the street while making this work?

**ESG:** The projectors are not small things, they are 50 – 60 cm long and are mounted on a tripod. The image is then projected onto the facing building. We visited a woman and she said she had "no problem" with us putting the projector in her apartment. But she also said "Look, there is drug dealing here, you know I hope they'll understand I am not doing it against them". So people are very conscious there.

When I was walking around taking photographs with three other people from the Fire station, a Garda car came up to us and a Garda said to me "are you crazy? – they'll take your camera". And you know what? The lads who were there came to me and said, "They came to you to tell you we will pinch your camera, didn't they?". But the moment that we explained the project to them and why we were doing it, there was no problem.

**JO:** Will Daedal(us) have a 'life' after it's over in terms of documentation?

**ESG:** First of all, this project invites the people of Dublin to come into this area to rediscover their city. With the 20 images of facades I will make 20 more images of them being projected in their displaced contexts. My intention is then to make an exhibition from these 40 photographs and make a publication in an arts space in the city. As this project

is also a collaboration with those who participate, I want to invite these people from the North Inner City to come to the exhibition and give them this publication. As an artist, my freedom is to choose for whom I work. As the people from Dublin already participate in the ritual of art and those of the North Inner City do not, this project will establish a vital exchange.

#### Projection locations

Commons St, Sheriff St Railway Bridge, CIE Bus Terminal – Sheriff St, National College of Ireland – Mayor St, Custom House Square Apartments – Custom, House Quay. Custom House Plaza , Dunne St,, Simmins Place ( off Summerhill ) 45 Summerhill, Viacom Billboard – junction of North Circular Rd and Summerhill. Folklore Project – Buckingham St, Lwr Buckingham St -, Buckingham Village, Apartments, Sean Treacy Flats – Buckingham St, Portland Row, Railway St, Bord Gais, Terrace Place, Beala Avenue, Rutland St, Richmond Parade, Richmond Cottages