

Beth Hatefutsoth

Contemporary Artists Respond to the  
Leni & Herbert Sonnenfeld Photo Collection

***never  
looked  
better***

# never looked better

## Contemporary Artists Respond to the Leni & Herbert Sonnenfeld Photo Collection

The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the  
Jewish Diaspora, Beth Hatefutsoth, Tel Aviv  
November 2008 – July 2009

### Exhibition

**Guest curators** Galit Eilat, Eyal Danon

**Artists** Yochai Avrahami, Yossi Attia and Itamar Rose

Yael Bartana, Michael Blum, Ilya Rabinovich

**Producer** Eyal Vexler

**Space design** Oren Sagiv

**Programming and technological solutions** Yair Reshef, Roei Kremer

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**Production** Noah Dekel



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## Forward

Hasia Israeli

The **Leni and Herbert Sonnenfeld Collection** of photographs and negatives, donated to the Beth Hatefutsoth collection, recounts the story of the Jewish people in the 20th century. The tens of thousands of photographs taken by the couple encompass a vast spectrum of experiences throughout the Jewish world, from Germany, where they began their career, through the United States of America where they immigrated in 1939, to Eretz-Israel and many Jewish communities the world over which they visited and documented on film.

This selection of photographs offers a fresh perspective at the actions and deeds of a great many Jews, and the landscapes and settings in which they lived their lives. The concept underlying the exhibition *Never Looked Better* — introducing a current reading of Leni and Herbert Sonnenfeld's unique vision by contemporary artists — poses a challenge of exploration to the Israeli audience, compelling viewers to look through and beyond the visible image. The artists' proposals and their thought-provoking perspectives breathe life into the Collection, enabling it to carry on the unusual legacy of their distinctive gaze.

The interpretations offered by artists **Yael Bartana, Michael Blum, Ilya Rabinovich, Yochai Avrahami, Yossi Attia and Itamar Rose** are innovative and variegated, offering the viewer the excitement and thrill experienced by the Sonnenfelds as they witnessed the actual events or participated in them, in real time.

The donation of the Sonnenfeld Collection to Beth Hatefutsoth by Margalieth and Joseph Avrashi, the executors of the Leni and Herbert Sonnenfeld estate,

is a highly significant contribution to the preservation of Jewish heritage. I would like to extend my gratitude to Bina Sela Tsur, Chief Curator of Beth Hatefutsoth, for the initial idea to combine contemporary interpretation with a historical collection; to the curators of the exhibition, Galit Eilat and Eyal Danon, for their originality; and to the participating artists for the resulting exhibition.

Many other individuals and organizations have contributed to the realization of the exhibition: the Beth Hatefutsoth staff, and especially Zippi Rosenne, Director of the Bernard H. and Miriam Oster Visual Documentation Center; Israel Lottery Council for the Arts, which supported the production of the catalogue; Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, and the American Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth.

## ***never looked better***

**galit eilat and eyal danon**

In 2007, the then chief curator of the Beth Hatefutsoth Museum, Bina Sela-Tsur, invited us to curate an exhibition dealing with the Sonnenfeld Collection which had been donated to the Museum two years earlier. She wanted a contemporary exhibition that would challenge the way in which the Museum confronts permanent and changing exhibitions.

The Collection arrived at the museum without the index including basic data about the photographs. Many of the items lacked information such as date, location where the photograph was taken, the names of the photographed subjects, etc. Sometimes these details were scribbled on the backs of the photographs. In some cases the information was contradictory or even erroneous. This state of affairs has complicated and prolonged the work involved in sorting the collection. Upon the opening of the exhibition, a mere 4000 photographs had been scanned and catalogued, out of an estimated total of 100,000 photographs. These opening conditions became an integral part of the curatorial process.

Acquisition of the Sonnenfeld Collection at Beth Hatefutsoth Archive is significant in several respects. First, the Collection was given to the museum almost in its entirety, and therefore offers a glance into the photographers' oeuvres and allows exploration throughout their years of activity. The

Collection spans works taken from the 1930s to the late 1980s—pivotal years in the history of the Zionist Movement, which saw events such as World War II and the establishment of the State of Israel, waves of immigration and settlement, wars, demographic changes, processes of industrialization, etc. Second, perhaps most important, the Sonnenfeld Collection is not a collection of copies or reproductions of exhibits found at Beth Hatefutsoth Museum. It is a collection of photographs complete with their negatives—a collection of original materials, rather than of knowledge: A real, authentic collection, rather than an archive.

Thus, the exhibition *Never Looked Better* is also an announcement to the public about the existence of a unique collection at the Museum, a type of an introduction, for the Collection as a whole will be put on display only when the process of cataloging and digitization is completed.

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**Herbert Sonnenfeld** (1906-1970) began taking photographs in Germany. **Leni Sonnenfeld** (1908-2004) assimilated into photographic practice before the couple's arrival in Eretz-Israel, initially as Herbert's assistant, and later on, as a photographer in her own right. In the 1930s, during a visit to Eretz-Israel, the Sonnenfelds tried to obtain an immigration permit, unsuccessfully, and were forced to return to Germany. As Nazi power in their homeland increased, they moved to the US, but continued to travel the world and perpetuate Jewish life in Europe. Among others, they took photographs of post-war European Jewry, and even documented Jewish settlement in Eretz-Israel.

Many photographs from the Collection were featured in exhibitions held throughout the world, chiefly in Zionist or Jewish context. Some of them, mainly Herbert's, were printed in Jewish and other magazines and newspapers the world over, including *The New York Times*, *Life* magazine, *Daily News*, and

*Jewish Week*. Keren Hayesod (Foundation Fund), the Jewish National Fund (JNF/KKL), and the Jewish Agency used Herbert Sonnenfeld's services, mainly between 1933 and 1948, whereas Leni Sonnenfeld's photographs are in the collections of leading museums, among them the Jewish Museum, Berlin; Museum of the City of New York; the Holocaust Museum, Washington DC; the Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York; and the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Los Angeles.

The Sonnenfeld Collection spans, as aforesaid, more than 100,000 negatives, transparencies, slides, and prints. The changes that occurred in the couples' photographic language over the years are readily apparent. Having been raised on the German photographic tradition, Herbert's work employs the Hellenistic approach to the beauty of the human body; furthermore, it is typified by the object's centering in the frame, dramatic chiaroscuro, and sharp contrasts—features which lead to their identification as propaganda photography. His early works, such as the gymnast series from 1934-35, even surrender influences of Nazi propaganda photographs. After several years in America, the couples' works developed a different, more open style. The photographs are more distant, and are not necessarily centered on the human figure, which is now a part of the setting. At the same time, most of these photographs, let us bear in mind, were intended for the press, for news agencies, or for the JNF and the Jewish Agency.

"Jewish Agency photographs" and "JNF photographs" have, over the years, become derogatory names for institutional propagandist photography, one which presents the strengths of the Zionist enterprise with heroic pathos intended for the eyes of those residing outside Israel, but also for those of local inhabitants. Such photography played an important role in the formation of the positive image of the heroic native born Jew, the mythological sabra, an antithesis to the diasporal Jew in both look and qualities, the so-called New Jew who became the object of admiration and hope for the founders' generation.

Jewish photographers active locally in the early 20th century depicted mainly the communities from which they hailed: Yaacov Ben Dov, a member of the Second Aliya (immigration wave), took pictures of the new Zionist community (*Yishuv*); Tzadok Bassan, third generation in Jerusalem, depicted the old *Yishuv* and the ultra-Orthodox Jewish congregation; Zvi Oron Orushkes, member of the Jewish Legion, worked for the Zionist circles, but made a living taking pictures for the British; and Avraham Soskin documented the early days of Tel Aviv.

\* \* \*

The Sonnenfeld Collection was not discovered unexpectedly. The couple's photographic aesthetic is foreign to neither Israelis nor international viewers. This fact was taken into consideration when we were invited to curate the exhibition, posing a unique challenge as to the way in which a collection ought to be presented when many of the images comprising it have long been visual classics of the Zionist movement and a part of the photographic history of the Jewish people in the 20th century. In fact, many Israeli Jews recognize the photographs, even if they cannot recall or do not know the photographer's name. They identify them as part of our collective imagery.

This fact presented us with a unique point of departure: engagement with a familiar collection containing images that belong to the collective visual reservoir of the Jewish society in Israel; a collection which arrived without its index and without any basic data about the photographs; and an intermediate state where only a part of the collection has been sorted and catalogued.

These knowledge limitations were transformed into the starting point for our work on the exhibition. The first question we posed to the participating artists was formulated accordingly: How would you have read the photographs had you come from Mars? Hence—although it is obviously impossible to

observe the photographs with eyes devoid of prior knowledge—a work process evolved which makes the show a sequence of proposals for a new reading of the photographs themselves and the collection as a whole.

We wanted to re-read the photographs in the Sonnenfeld Collection along with the visitors to Beth Hatefutsoth, to try to generate a critical discourse toward it and toward the nostalgic gaze it generates. Instead of simply exhibiting several photographs from the Collection, a choice which could not have been justified (bearing in mind the scarce information we have about them), hence a selection which could not have been backed by a curatorial stand—we decided to discuss the symbolical significance of the Collection and the political implications of the cataloguing system used at Beth Hatefutsoth. We decided to commission works from six contemporary artists, thereby striving to generate a broader reading of the Collection instead of a uniform reading through the Jewish-Zionist narrative alone.

An exhibition of contemporary art at Beth Hatefutsoth, designed to allow for a critical gaze and a political reading of a pivotal photographic collection such as the Sonnenfeld Collection, naturally raises questions about the link between its contents and the ideological space in which it is staged. How can such an exhibition generate a new, critical reading within a didactic space whose goal is to educate, bequeath and instill a national Zionist narrative? What happens to a viewer who comes with expectations pre-dictated by his former knowledge of Beth Hatefutsoth? Does the encounter between the exhibition and the space allow reading the works as a proposal of an additional or another narrative? Does it allow for their reading as a critical dialogue with the ideology promoted by the hosting venue?

Several guidelines were followed during the work on the exhibition. We decided to stage an exhibition of contemporary art, for which the Sonnenfeld Collection serves as a starting point and not an end point. Furthermore, we decided that the works created especially for the exhibition will stand in their

own right, and will not require the presence of the Collection's photographs to be valuable. This was reinforced by the fact that photographs by the Sonnenfelds were not included in the exhibition as works in and of themselves, but only as part of the artists' new works.

At the same time, the exhibition was designed without interfering with the museum's existing walls. The works were hung on temporary walls which were attached to the museum's foundation, but do not obey the building's architecture. Instead, they introduce a new axis of movement in the resulting new structure—designed by architect Oren Sagiv—which stands at the center of the exhibition space. The structure only brushes the existing walls, dissociating the exhibition from the Beth Hatefutsoth building. This detachment reflects the ambivalence regarding the link between the position presented by the works in the exhibition, and its presentation at Beth Hatefutsoth. Moreover, in order to allow one to linger in front of the work and the image, we avoided providing the existing data about the Collection photographs which were incorporated in the artists' works. The act of lingering allows for new reading directions which would have been prevented had the historical information about the photographs been posted next to them. This is an antithetical approach to the one taken in the other exhibition spaces at Beth Hatefutsoth, where the reading of the image is subordinate to the textual information attached to it.

*Never Looked Better* is, thus, an attempt to ask questions about the role of a collection and of an archive in a historical museum. How can a different reading be applied to a photographic collection such as the Sonnenfeld Collection, held by a museum dealing with the lives of the Jewish communities in the world, a museum which outlines a hermetic narrative excluding all others? How can the exhibition support the museum's collection and make its contents more relevant to a contemporary audience? How can it build a bridge between the audience and the photographs in the collection? How can the photographs

regain meaning and become vivid items in the cultural field of the present?

Artists **Ilya Rabinovich, Yochai Avrahami, Yael Bartana, Michael Blum, Yossi Attia and Itamar Rose** were invited to participate in the exhibition. In their work these artists incorporate questions about the way in which historical narratives and collective memories are constructed and shaped, about the reading of archival materials as part of the work process. They introduce a critical gaze at systems of power and authority, contemplating the use of images and a visual language of propaganda and the media.

In his work, **Ilya Rabinovich**, now residing in the Netherlands, focuses on interior and space photographs of institutions of knowledge, authority, and power, among them museums, hospitals, and schools. In the 1990s, after graduating from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, he worked in Israel, and was among the first photographers to address the interior aesthetics of institutional spaces. In 1999 he was commissioned by Beth Hatefutsoth to document synagogues in Mexico City as well as other property belonging to the local Jewish community.

Following photographs from the Sonnenfeld collection presenting the Knesset in its current location, and others portraying the sites in which it was housed prior to its permanent residence—the old opera house in Tel Aviv and the Frumin House in Jerusalem—Rabinovich set out to photograph these sites and their new functions today. The Opera House on the corner of Allenby and Hayarkon streets in Tel Aviv was replaced by a shopping mall that saw better days. Frumin House in Jerusalem, where the Knesset operated between 1950 and 1966, is now the residence of the Rabbinical Court. Scrutiny of the photographs depicting these buildings, alongside photographs of the present Knesset building with its two wings, raises questions about the link between a space's architectural and interior design, and the activity taking place inside it. The spaces of the Opera House shopping mall bear great resemblance to the spaces of the Knesset's new wing. The spaces in both buildings were custom-

made for their prospective activity, as opposed to the Frumin House where existing spaces were adapted to the building's new function. The similarity between the spaces of authority and power, and the spaces of commerce and the free market is highly conspicuous. Rabinovich's realistic gaze enables observation of the spaces without evasion or beautification. They are presented in all their glory or wretchedness, and many details surrender what is going on inside them, whether on the level of governmental power or on the level of everyday use as a meeting place for the individual and the systems of government, economy, etc. In addition, the work also raises the importance of historical reconstruction and preservation for discussion. What impact do processes of destruction and reconstruction of historical buildings have on our collective memory? Is there a link between the increased awareness of the importance in conservation of physical structures, and the undermining of collective memory and the unifying myth?

**Yossi Attia** and **Itamar Rose** set out to find the figures documented in five of the Sonnenfeld Collection photographs. They embarked on a journey after the information missing in the photographs, trying to learn it by turning to the "man on the street." Each of the participants in the experiment, intended to locate the photographed figures, lends the picture an added meaning through the real family history projected onto the photograph along with the interviewee's biography, or alternatively—a fictive, imaginary biography. All these speculations correspond with the Zionist ethos, including those meant to unravel it. The woman describing her family that immigrated from Morocco, and her mother who did not believe in Zionism and returned to her country of origin, finds a way to convey her opinions and her relation to reality through the image presented to her. She allows for a personal reading of the past. The work as a whole offers an anthropological gaze, emphasizing the attempt made in the exhibition to deviate from popular collective memory, possibly from the political collective memory, and make for a personal reading and the creation

of a personal memory which is not always opposed to the popular or political collective memory. Such an act may facilitate the coexistence of multiple, not necessarily overlapping memories, thus deconstructing the single narrative introduced by Beth Hatefutsoth.

**Yochai Avrahami's** work, *Cabinet*, touches upon the line between vision and voice; between what is unfolded before us and the reality which is not in the known, visible spectrum, but rather requires listening. It brings together two life stories, significant parts of which are assimilated, without a guiding hand, into the Sonnenfeld Collection.

*Cabinet* presents the testimony of Erwin Doron, who, as a young boy, came to Israel from Germany with Aliyat Hanoar (youth immigration) to the Ludwig Tietz Trade School, joined the Hagana Underground, served as a Brigadier General in the IDF, and later was director of Beth Hatefutsoth and fulfilled assorted roles at Tel Aviv University, the United Jewish Appeal, and the Jewish Agency. His testimony is juxtaposed with the testimony of Iddo Gal, son of Uzi Gal, inventor of the famous Uzi submachine gun, and grandson of Erich Glass, who was a pilot and an aerial photographer during World War I, an art student at the Bauhaus, a photojournalist, an artist and art teacher in Kibbutz Yagur. Alongside these testimonies, the work presents the testimonies of others connected to the biographies of the two, people who met in Kibbutz Yagur in the 1930s. Through the story of the invention of the Uzi we become acquainted with some of the figures active in Israel upon its establishment, learning how they regard their past today. The motif of creativity runs through the plot—the creativity involved in the invention of the weapon as well as artistic creativity. At various points in the film Avrahami connects the memories of the interviewees of art school, which they believe continued the tradition of the Bauhaus, with their engagement in development of weaponry in Kibbutz Yagur's arms caches.

Reference to the mode of presentation customary in didactic museums—a

combination of exhibits, audio-visual aids, and the creation of a spatially unfolding narrative—enables Avrahami to undermine the very ability to recount a tightly-knit historical narrative. The work constructs and deconstructs a narrative sequence, including testimonies from various sources—contradictory evidence, fragments of stories and memories. Even before the specific story presented in the work, all these focus on the very feasibility of presenting a narrative and educating in its light.

In *The Missing Negatives of the Sonnenfeld Collection* **Yael Bartana** chose photographic portraits of workers, farmers, and soldiers from the Collection. In order to reconstruct the process whereby the image of the Zionist New Jew was created, as in the Sonnenfelds' work, Bartana created reenactments of several of the original photographs with the help of young Palestinians and Jews currently residing in Israel, thus restaging the historical photographs using props and costumes. The result is a reenactment of images deeply etched in Israeli collective memory and consciousness. The work process and the work's title allude to the existence of a mixed community, of pioneering not based on ethnicity, which existed in the pre-State years and was excluded from the Sonnenfeld Collection as well as the collective Israeli memory. Bartana's photographs reinstate the Collection—as well as the narrative fostered by Beth Hatefutsoth—with the erased story. The reenactment of the photographs introduces the chapter about the Palestinians' part in the establishment of the State into the historical narrative of the establishment of the State, as well as the Palestinian citizens of Israel, whose stories are absent from the narrative outlined by Beth Hatefutsoth.

In observing the reenacted photographs, one will be unable to tell the religious or ethnic affiliation of the photographed subjects. They are all beautiful, looking into the future which we may be able to build together on the ruins of the bloody past.

**Michael Blum** presents a calendar with photographs he selected from

the Collection. The format of the photographic calendar is common in the world as a gift as a marketing and PR medium used by commercial firms, companies, and museums. Blum clings to the customary format of these calendars, presenting a set of twelve photographs, one for each month. Page after page, these photographs cumulate to form a serial story.

In the first photograph, taken in Beersheba in the 1950s, an immigrant from Romania polishes a Bedouin's shoes; in the second—a news reporter faces a map of the Arab world; in the third—Bedouin sheikhs stand in front of the Israeli military headquarters in Beersheba in 1948, with the country's emblem fluttering over their heads. Another photograph presents Bedouins watching the Israeli Independence Day celebrations in Beersheba in 1949. The calendar presents the less expected photographs from a Collection taken by photographers who helped shape the image of the New Jew. These, however, may well be the most significant photographs in the Collection, documenting the moment in Israel's history when a distinction between citizens with privileged rights and others with limited rights was created.

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Alongside these works, the exhibition features the already catalogued part of the original Collection, as it appears in the archive of Beth Hatefutsoth. We added search words to it, not previously included in the archive. The archive's presentation mode was modeled to allow for high accessibility, and the search is visual and intuitive. Search words cannot be entered into the digital reservoir; instead one must select an image and skim through the search words attached to it. Subsequently, the user may select an image or press one of the keywords and see what it brings up.

Such a search offers a closer interaction with the photograph pool, forming new, different ways to read the photographs. Existing categories and

divisions are juxtaposed with a different option for cataloging the Sonnenfelds' photographic work, making for a different view of their oeuvre as well as their part in Zionist propaganda, and their participation in the generation and shaping of the visual memory of the place as part of the Israeli collective memory.

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*Never Looked Better* is an attempt to work at the heart of the Zionist establishment, to operate from within the production house of the Jewish narrative, and to examine how, precisely from this place, new paths may be introduced as well as new ways in which to read the past and confront the collective meanings of the Jewish myth. Through the propagandist raw materials of the Zionist narrative and the ideological exhibition spaces of Beth Hatefutsoth we tried to ask questions not only about the Sonnenfeld Collection, but also about its role in the construction of the Zionist myth—and equally so, about the influence and power of this myth today.

We did not want, nor could we avoid the nostalgic element in the exhibition, which, we feel, has a great impact on the reading of the contemporary works. Thus, the experience of observing the exhibition is centered on the presence of the Sonnenfelds' photographs; not the originals, but rather their presence in the background, their being the origin enabling us to observe a past which is remembered as better and more beautiful.

The responses of visitors to the exhibition indicate that the attempt to introduce a different reading fails. Does this have to do with the magic of our past image? Is it due to the presentation at Beth Hatefutsoth? Is it due to our reluctance to awaken from the Zionist myth which still provides us with a warm nest, a refuge from our current image?

In order to facilitate another dimension in reading the exhibition, the collection, and the act performed at the Museum, we turned to writer, artist and curator, Avi Pitchon, and to Dr. Ilit Ferber of the Department of Philosophy at Tel Aviv University, who contributed essays for the catalogue. We would like to thank them and all the other individuals who participated in the creation of the exhibition and catalogue: the participating artists; architect Oren Sagiv, who designed the exhibition space; Zippi Rosenne, Director of the Visual Documentation Center; Eyal Vexler, who produced the show; and all the staff of Beth Hatefutsoth who supported and showed interest in the process as well as the end result.

## *the ghosts of history*

**Ilit Ferber**

Thinking about history is always bound with the consideration of loss. Fathoming historical thought is, in this sense, always an inherent and essential addressing and tackling of loss and its consequences. The problem of loss is best approached precisely by looking at its pathological variant, that is, the pathological relation to the event of loss. For this purpose, one of the most challenging and productive explorations of the issue unfolds in Freud's famous discussion of melancholia.

The pathological nature of melancholia rests mainly in its stubborn refusal to accept the loss it has experienced. Because of inner conflicts and a strong ambivalence towards the lost love object, the melancholic simply refuses to let it go (and it is indeed a "simple" refusal since the melancholic has no other option. This does not reduce, however, his suffering). Freud views this withholding, even denial of the loss as a struggle that the melancholic maintains with the health of his ego and with life itself. Without accepting the loss (as the mourner does) there is no continuation of life—specifically, of libidinal life.

This dangerous withholding stems from a breakdown of some of our most basic intuitions: the sharp borders separating life and death, past and present, and the melancholic and his lost object of love. By internalizing it, in what

seems to be at once a gesture of love and violence, the melancholic turns the lost object into part of his own ego. He now contains the loss within himself. This pathological structure makes clear why life and death, past and present, are no longer viable categories for the melancholic. The living subject of the present incorporates within him the dead or lost object of the past.<sup>1</sup>

When describing the melancholic's pathology, Freud constructs his claims regarding melancholia using the figure of the mourner as a mirror-image. The mourner who experiences a terrible loss goes through a preliminary period in which he suffers from similar behavioural patterns to those of the melancholic. However, this period soon passes and yields to what Freud would call a "healthy" and "normative" decision to let go of the loss and to free the libido to search for new objects of love. In other words, the mourner has made the "proper" decision—he has let go of the past and its losses and has opened himself anew to life. He has obeyed the "reality principle." We can already see what Freud is aiming at: the melancholic consciousness renders its subject as paralyzed, even fixed to the loss. This fixation causes a cessation of movement in the subject—the movement of life. This, in the Freudian world, is what makes it pathological. There is no movement forward, no gesture made towards life; instead, there is stillness, even paralysis within the moment of loss.

Nevertheless, what happens in this frozen moment, in this lacuna in the movement of life? Can we identify something else here besides the destructive consciousness of the melancholic? It is my claim that this frozen cavity of stillness offers some invaluable questions regarding our historical thought, and specifically, our historical consciousness. Historical consciousness thus reenacts the Freudian treatment of pathology, and opens up some of the deepest concerns we have, or should have, regarding the relation between the past and present, and between the living and the dead. And, most importantly, it raises the concern regarding the special structure of what I would like to call the obligation and commitment of the present to the past and its losses.

<sup>1</sup> I use the categories of life and death here, thus addressing loss as a final, consummating one. However, in his article, Freud gives an account of various types of losses calling forth melancholia, some of them having to do with an actual death of a beloved and others, however, concerning losses in terms of an abandonment, the loss of an idea, and so forth.

To develop these concerns, I wish to turn to Walter Benjamin and his remarkable proximity to melancholia (in this I refer not to his personal melancholy but to a more structural view of his philosophy). Specifically, I wish to take up one of the intriguing figures Benjamin is interested in, a figure I believe exemplifies the melancholic stance towards loss and history and its internal anatomy: the figure of the ghost.

Ghostly apparitions, or the "virtual space of spectrality" as Derrida puts it, are usually considered (at least in western culture) to be fictional; sometimes they are regarded as images designating a pathological-unreasonable point of view. These apparitions rupture the "reasonable," unambiguous division between life and death, or real and unreal, which is suddenly exposed.

Benjamin is drawn to the figure of the ghost, especially in his work on the *Trauerspiel* (sorrow-plays), a theater genre of the seventeenth century to which he devoted his habilitation work, *The Origin of the German Sorrow-Play*.<sup>2</sup> The *Trauerspiel* presents an astounding number of ghost figures, which appear in the majority of the plays, sometimes as the ghosts of dead people coming back to haunt the living, and sometimes even as ghosts of living people on stage.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the relation of the *Trauerspiel* to death, is pertinent to the understanding of the important role of the ghost in them. In the plays, death does not mark the end of life, and life is in fact not so far removed from death—the two states exist concomitantly, and this concomitance is exemplified by the figure of the ghost. The basic recognition of the *Trauerspiel* is that no specific moment of closure exists; there is hence a process of ending that opens up, or, put otherwise, there is a beginning of work that is directed

<sup>2</sup> I have altered the translation of the title from "tragic drama" into "sorrow plays" (the literal translation of *Trauerspiel*), since tragedy is precisely what Benjamin sees as the genre opposed to that of the *Trauerspiel*. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Trans. John Osborne, Verso, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> The appearance of the ghost sometimes causes the protagonists to change their ways, and becomes thus a transformative and reformative event. The protagonist's ghost accompanies him in his life; the ghost or corpse-image accompanies the living individual and, thereby, violates the determinate threshold between life and death. The dead characters, Hamlet's father, for example, continue their roles in the plays after the cessation of life and their consummate end remain infinitely deferred. Hamlet is, no doubt, an exemplar of many of Benjamin's discussions of the *Trauerspiel* book.

toward denouement, coming to its own, and putting to rest. In the plays, this work is not fulfilled and remains as a mere presentation of an eternal return of an inherited retribution and debt. Death is recurrent and never-ending. The most clear-cut moment becomes, in the hands of the *Trauerspiel*, an incessant, unremitting occurrence.

The ghost figures of the *Trauerspiel* plays were so alluring to Benjamin precisely because they tolerate the pathological inability to discern life and death and differentiate between them—violating what seems to be the ultimate border. Benjamin finds that the negative determination of the ghostly as pathological is not operative in the baroque *Trauerspiel*; in fact, the figure of the ghost possessed a social and literary legitimacy at the time, which is partly the reason for his fascination with it. Benjamin interprets the *Trauerspiel* as a genre in which death, the epitome of finitude, is revealed as infinite and contingent. Death no longer provides resolution in the plays but rather challenges the alleged conclusiveness with indeterminacy.<sup>4</sup>

The ghost's existence is in fact dependant precisely on what Freud would term "pathology." The structure of its existence is grounded in the blurring between life and death, past and present. In the figure of the ghost, there persist constant remainders of the past within the present, and, moreover, of the present within the past. This is part of the internal logic of this figure which is, in many senses, similar to the logic of melancholia. The figure of the ghost embodies the fact that death is not consummate—that is, that the mourners complete parting from the loss is in fact the response that stands out. The ghost's existence is governed by a melancholic logic: it remains, hovering,

4 Another point of reference to the liminal nature of the ghost can be found in its doubtfulness, or in its not lending itself to be known. Derrida develops this notion when he discusses Marxism as ghostly. He writes: "One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge... One does not know if it is living or if it is dead. Here is – or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything... this thing that looks at us, that concerns us [*qui nous regarde*], comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy." Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. P. Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 6.

5 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 4.

in the space between life and death, a presence in the past that has cast its shadow on the present and provides a way to link what-has-been with what-there-is without falling into psychological pathologies. Even if we were to say that this figure is "merely" a literal persona, one cannot ignore the remarkable form it takes in relation to loss, temporality, and melancholia.

However, not only does the ghost establishes a link between past and present—it does so in a very active manner. That is, the ghost in Baroque plays (and even in twentieth-century Hollywood horror movies) usually appears because of a certain "unfinished business," which requires it to haunt the present. In other words, understanding the ghost as undead or on the liminal threshold between life and death, past and present, signals an absence of reconciliation in the ghost. Death, it can be maintained, epitomizes reconciliation in that it represents the fundamental event of something realizing itself whereas the ghost's being, is always unresolved. This unresolved nature possesses an important haunting quality that connects the ghost to the person or objects it haunts. Interestingly, Derrida accounts for the haunting of the ghost as something historical but not dated.<sup>5</sup> That is, it not only manifests itself in specific circumstances, but its apparition marks the very existence of what it confronts. The ghost always appears in front of the protagonist, who **must** encounter it. Its appearance always holds the potential of transforming the reality of the play and the lives of its protagonists. In that sense, the ghost possesses accountability toward a specific character or specific developments in the play.<sup>6</sup>

For Benjamin, this point of connection between the ghosts and the living, between past and present, is crucial because of the special, reciprocal

6 In the introduction to *Benjamin's Ghosts: Interventions in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, Richter expounds on Benjamin and the figure of the ghost by reading Benjamin's very legacy as ghostlike. He understands Benjamin's impact on such a diverse range of disciplines and the basic resistance of his texts to assimilation as a haunting characteristic of his thought. Richter writes that "the truth of [Benjamin's] writings is elsewhere... one can only fully grasp his concepts and sentences, which return to haunt once we turn our backs on them. In short, they are ghostly" (3). However, my point in discussing the ghost is somewhat different. It is not located in the spectral character of Benjamin's own writings and their legacy, but rather in the role the figure of the ghost plays for Benjamin, and in the meaning it entails for him.

relationship it contains. This moment of encounter demands a **recognition** in two senses: first, the recognition of the present in the call of the past, and second, the commitment that stems from such a call, that is, a recognition of the commitment entailed by the response to the call.

This call allows a gripping of the past in its short emergence. This appearance “flits by,” an “irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.”<sup>7</sup> The ghostly image harbors a threat within it: if not retrieved and transformed into a space of work, it will disappear before the present that does not recognize itself as being intended by it. This potential for disappearance is conceived by Benjamin as a moment of danger, which he regards as inherent to historical thought: “Articulating the past historically . . . means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (Theses, 391).<sup>8</sup>

Benjamin emphasizes the danger of losing the opportunity to respond and come to terms with the call always inherent in this encounter.<sup>9</sup> The point would not be to **exorcise** the ghost, but rather to **think through it**, to make the encounter with it ethically meaningful.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, this call initiates a conversation and entails a responsibility to participate in it.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes such an undertaking can merely amount to recognizing or bearing witness to the ghost. The appearance of the ghost can hence be understood as what turns the past, as a mere temporal category, into history. That is, the encounter with the ghost offers an opportunity, or perhaps a condition, to open up the telling of history’s story.

7 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History,” pp. 390–391.

8 This also appears in Benjamin’s famous phrase from *The Arcades Project*, “pulling the emergency brake,” and in the figure of the shooting at the clocks which he describes in the Theses.

9 Elsewhere, Benjamin writes about the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. In “Meaning of Time in the Moral Universe,” he discusses the temporal aspect of forgiveness (and the “storm of forgiveness”) that is completely differentiated from reconciliation and can take place without the latter. This pair of terms is described there in relation to the parting from the dead. See W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. I, pp. 286–87.

10 G. Richter, “Introduction” in *Benjamin’s Ghosts*, p. 5.

11 Note the etymological connection between “responsibility” and “response.”

Furthermore, the present moment’s specificity is connected to the call, so that coming to terms with it becomes possible in that moment alone. Recognizing the call and the ethical responsibility it entails, then, involves a specific, almost personal, relation to it. The ghostly apparition always has to do with the person who encounters it. The instant of recognizability occurs in a certain present moment—thus the call of the ghost is never sent out arbitrarily, but is always directed toward something or someone.<sup>12</sup> Only under these conditions can a moment of reconciliation be possible. Thinking about this call through the figure of the ghost renders it a personal call, and herein lies the crucial import of the ghost.

In a short text published in 1930,<sup>13</sup> Benjamin writes that the present, “today,” may seem small or meager; however, “whatever form it takes,<sup>14</sup> our task is to seize it by the horns so that we can interrogate [*befragen*] the past. It is the bull whose blood must fill the grave if the spirits of the departed are to appear at its edge.”<sup>15</sup> The blood of the bull that fills the grave comes together with the spirits of the lost ones gathering around it. This is a moment of encounter between past and present—a moment that should be seized with all fortitude. This encounter can become legible and bear fruit only if appropriated at the right moment. The

12 The ghost of the dead king in *Hamlet* is an interesting example in this context. At first it appears in silence, twice before the guards and once before Horatio, and reveals nothing about his appearance’s meaning. He only speaks when Hamlet is present, after being called for by his friends. Horatio says to them: “Break we our watch up, and by my advice / Let us impart what we have seen to-night / Unto young Hamlet, for, upon my life, / This spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him” (l.i.168–71). Even then, it is only to Hamlet, in a place where the others cannot be part of their exchange, whom the ghost agrees to speak. He demands revenge for his murder and explains that he is doomed to wander the realm of the ghosts until Hamlet avenges him: “I am thy father’s spirit, / Doom’d for a certain term to walk at night, / And for the day confin’d to fast in fires, / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg’d away. . . .” (l.v.9–13).

13 Walter Benjamin, “Against a Masterpiece. Criticism written on *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik* by Max Kommerell”. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. II, pp. 378–85.

14 In the original German text, “*Aber es mag sein wie es will*,” this expression imparts a more active part to the past, which “decides” for itself, or is independent in the form it ventures to take. In the English translation, something of this activity or independence is lost.

15 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. II, p. 383.

commitment toward the spirits surrounding the bloody grave is one of work, of exercising (rather than exorcising) the past. In that sense, historical meaning is embedded within us, within our “theories,” and should become material for the philosophical work that will disclose it. However, this disclosure will not regain the past but will instead unfold it from within the present of its reading, from its “today.”

The recognition of the past here, in “seizing it by the horns,” does not only concern the ghosts of the dead and the past as such. These spirits can never exist on their own as past; they are always entangled with the present. Their call to the present is thus not merely identified but recognized—recognition here meaning the way the past inscribes itself in the present and is itself transformed by this inscription. The debt it demands of us is therefore expressed as a claim to the present as such. The ghost, in that sense, requires of us an action that is inherently related to its existence but can nevertheless take its proper form only in the present. The ghost, thus, can realize itself only in the present.

Benjamin's historical thought was often interpreted in visual terms;<sup>16</sup> here, however, I want to suggest that it might be helpful to think of it specifically in terms of sound and voice. “Shouldn't we rather speak of events which affect us like an echo—one awakened by a sound that seems to have issued from somewhere in the darkness of past life?” writes Benjamin in his “Berlin Childhood around 1900.” This sound from the past enters our consciousness as an echo—striking us as a familiar voice would.<sup>17</sup> Through this sound of the call, we enter into “the cool sepulcher of the past, from whose vault the present seems to resound only as an echo.”<sup>18</sup> Benjamin describes this call or sound as an echo precisely because this call resounds in no single direction. It echoes, meaning that once the call is made, its reverberations and its consequences have their own dynamics, going back and forth between the past and the

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*, Princeton University Press, 1997. and Ariella Azoulay, *Once Upon a Time: Photography Following Walter Benjamin* (in Hebrew), Bar-Ilan University Press, 2007. In his *Specters of Marx*, Derrida mentions an interesting visual constituent of the ghost. He writes: “...the specter first of all sees us. From the other side of the eye, visor effect, it looks at us even before we see it or even before we see period. We feel ourselves observed, sometimes under surveillance by it even before any apparition” (p. 101).

present. In that sense, the transformative consequences of the ghostly call occur in the present as well as in the past. History re-reads and re-stages not only the meaning of the past, but always and inherently its own meaning in the moment of its undertaking.

The ghost is hence not a stranger to us, inasmuch as it echoes something already there, even if concealed, something that is recognized rather than devised. That is, specifically, the powerful inherent characteristic of the ghost—its call echoes in us, like the familiar voice of a stranger.<sup>19</sup> We behold the ghost, and in our bearing witness acknowledge an obligation to the debt of this apparition. Benjamin concludes that the ghost only operates through its intersection with us. The importance of this intersection lies in its transformative consequences for the present as well as the past. The disclosure of the past's meaning necessarily opens up the present anew, and vice versa. In this sense, the dead are never completely dead, and the past can never be hermetically closed.<sup>20</sup>

Shifting the discussion of the ghost as a figure in the plays into the realm of the philosophy of history, I claim that the importance of this image opens up the question of how the haunting nature of the ghostly can be conceived

<sup>17</sup> Here Benjamin describes this encounter between the past and the present in terms of a voice and not an image. Benjamin starts the passage (entitled “News of Death”) by challenging the concept of *déjà-vu*, taken from the visual realm, with that of sound and echo. I see the model of the ghost as closer to this model of sound and echo (and “call”) than that of an image. Walter Benjamin, “Berlin Childhood around 1900” [1934 version], *Selected Writings*, Vol. II, pp. 389–90.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “...a ghost had appeared to me. I would have had a hard time describing the place where the specter went about its business. Still, it resembled a setting that was known to me, though likewise in accessible.” (Walter Benjamin, “A ghost,” *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, p. 376). Benjamin's text on his childhood is an intriguing example of how the personal dimension of autobiography encounters history as such. Benjamin's discussion of his childhood, is in fact, in many senses, a discussion of the city of Berlin around the turn of the century.

<sup>20</sup> This claim is intimately related to Benjamin's close relationship with Jewish mysticism. See for instance Benjamin's discussion of this in the “Theses on the Concept of History.”

as a basis of a historical-philosophical work, in which the encounter with the spectral serves as a starting point or inauguration for Benjamin's enterprise of the philosophy of history.

The appearance of the ghost is meaningful, independent of the question whether this meaning has yet been realized. The response to the call of the ghost is ethically grounded and holds within it the potential of reconciling the haunting nature of the ghost. The response, thus, can stop the recurrence of its appearing and "quiet" the ghost, allowing a repose in which historical meaning is presented. In this way the ghost is "put to rest."

Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* offers the illuminating insinuation that the melancholic's lost object is half-alive; it is an object already lost and therefore not living, but it is also not yet completely dead, since it still exists in one way or another within the melancholic consciousness. This half-alive or buried-alive being can be understood as ghostly. The pathology of the melancholic lies in an inability to let go, in his being unable or unwilling to part and bring to rest. However, rest is also absent from the object itself, which hovers between life and death and is powerless before the destructive melancholic energy clinging to it. Relocating Freud's account in the realm of historical meaning in light of Benjamin's transformation of the lost object's pathology, the terminology of stillness or rest might gain an auxiliary meaning. The ghosts of the past must be put to rest, and such rest can only be attained by answering the call of the past—which reaches us in the form of a ghost.

I would like to return to the frozen quality of the melancholic consciousness in regard to its loss. Reviewing the structure of the ghostly encounter, and the way in which it opens a space for an activity in which the past and present encounter one another, I claim here that the "standstill" and "frozenness" experienced by the melancholic serve, more than its destructive energies, as the conditions in which historical meaning is revealed. The call of the ghost recognized by the present is the starting point for a joint venture in which past

and present come together in one stroke. In this undertaking, a demand from the past meets the response of an obligation (perhaps, even a responsibility) of the present. Standstill, therefore, also serves as a repose in which a moment of reconciliation takes place. By "reconciliation" I do not mean an atonement for a specific historical wrong or injustice; I refer, rather, to a response to a call sent by the ghosts of the past. Such a response can take many forms, all of which have to do in one way or another with an expression and a re-presentation of the past.

Considering history always entails our giving account of representation and the mechanisms of power involved in it. However, it also entails a meticulous work of disclosure and not only of the ways in which the mechanisms of the present obscure the past. It is sometimes revealed that the present itself is a victim of these mechanisms in the same, if not a deeper, way. In the transformation of the past as a temporal category, into that of the past as history, one should bear in mind that the act of historicizing holds a transformative potential not merely for the past but also—and even more so—to the present out of which it is written. In this sense, it is the moment of encounter and not the independent content it holds, that is important. A representation of the past is always inherently a representation of the present from which the gaze is directed.

Benjamin's theses on the concept of history thus receive a new echo. They call for an opening of a relationship with the past, founded on the acknowledgment that, as Benjamin puts it, "the only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that **even the dead** will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious" (*Theses*, p. 391, italics in original). The dead not being safe means that the past is not yet resolved, and will not be resolved until its demanding call is answered, or at least given an echo by the present. The latter must remain engaged with what has been, with the

dead that have not yet been put to rest. It has to fully comprehend the danger entailed in not seizing the horns of the past at the moment of its call. The work of the historian has to be undertaken, in this sense, as if it is constantly being called upon by ghosts. Acknowledging and recognizing this ever-recurring call transforms the labor of turning the past into history into an ethically significant work. Hence, encountering the ghost embodies the historical structure of this call and its consequences: having a deep ethical obligation towards the voice of the ghost; acknowledging the personal dimension of the encounter; acknowledging the danger inherent in not responding to the call; reconciling with the ghost and putting it to rest.

***the truth of beauty  
and the verity of grace***  
**critical yearning for an aesthetic of justice**

**Avi Pitchon**

*“The world is broad and open, so fascinating to explore. Don’t pause, keep on moving, and wonderful marvels you’ll expose. Dani–Dina walk along by the side of the road, and all of a sudden she hears, a light plane whiz! Clouds overhead, a smile from dreamland, and now it is real, every minute a new thrill.”<sup>1</sup>*

I

Sunlight on summery freckles. Warm wind caresses my tanned body. I am about four years old. My pupils contract, the sun shoots flares that shine on either side of the string from which the triangular banners are suspended on the balcony, blinding yellow–white and endless azure and comic–book faces in cheeky cheerful pop colors of our commanders and leaders on the thick paper flags, intermittently combined with the flag of Israel and the emblems of the IDF and its various units; our star–leaders, carried by the hot, dry East wind against the backdrop of a deep blue sky, making the heart thump in

<sup>1</sup> Shlomo Artzi, theme song for the Israeli road safety TV series *DaniDina*, 1970s.

a young chest. The neighbors gather on Mom and Dad's balcony to watch the fighter planes marking trails of whiteness with a thundering, heaven and earth shuddering sound. Blue and white in the encounter of nature and machine, both of them ours, ours! Sounds of laughter and a lively conversation are swallowed by the thunder and the azure, extending one another in an uninterrupted flow, sustaining, spawning, and reviving one another. Later I pedal my training-wheel bicycle, looking at the flags attached to the ends of my handlebars, the plastic rattling in the wind. Beach sand crunches between my teeth, and my tongue is still yellow from a lemon ice-pop. I pedal faster to make them stand upright. It is I who breathes life into the flag.

## 2

Every critical position is underlain by a broken heart. To be more accurate, a critical position not founded on a broken heart cannot bring about change, and is doomed to ephemerality. It doesn't matter whether the position denies the rift, the expulsion, or whether it has simply forgotten that the rift was opened and the altar was broken—because denial and forgetfulness do not eliminate what happened. The utopian yearning for heaven on earth must be born not based on rational objection, but primarily on the basis of memory—memory of the banishment from Eden. Eden will never be realized if it remains a mere longed-for, abstract model, no matter how convinced its makers are of its scientific-historical determinism. Eden will materialize only as an elusive Shangri-la to which we return. Elusive yet concrete, and once again—entirely concrete, not as a geographical location, nor as the product of Marxist (or modernistic or fascist, or even religious) analytical planning, but rather as the Flower of the Golden Heart<sup>2</sup>: the place from which we were banished is at home—in our hearts, in our memory, in a childhood that embraces narratives as an act of magic (narratives and myths of justice, truth, and beauty are indeed

<sup>2</sup> A Russian folk tale, adapted to Hebrew in the mid 1920s, recounting the story of a son who goes off in search of the only medicine that can heal his ailing mother—the Golden Heart Flower.

magical, enchanting, mesmerizing—and not as an opiate for the masses in a cold and negating Marxist lingo, but in a New Age, Peter-Panish one: only if you believe in the magic powder will you really be able to fly). Eden is not a model, a proposal or an oppositionary utopian ideology: Eden is a memory, a state-of-mind, a neo-naïve autosuggestion, born from perception. Eden is neither a place nor a concept, but rather a cognitive state, and as such, it is more tangible than both. Eden is an intersection of neurons, a missed heartbeat. We could not have yearned for it had we not stood at that junction in the past, had we not felt the heart's pounding. Eden is a garden locked perhaps, but it is here, inside. And the key? Finding the key is a process of realization. If we understand that the Golden Heart Flower is not somewhere out there, but rather here at home, that there is a home, that there was a home, and that the home may be re-presented like Heidegger's Greek temple<sup>3</sup>—it must be erected so that God will take the trouble to show himself and dwell in it. This re-presentation is in our hands and under our control, and it is not even absent, it is simply dormant. It is important to avoid the deceitful obstacle of time. The only static thing here is the eternal flame, the Golden Heart Flower. Eternity alone is static. The past is dynamic. We must follow the specific neural junction at which we once stood, although when we stand there again, it will be different. A thousand gates in Eden's waiting room, not one. Essence is eternal and static, form is ever-changing; you cannot immerse yourself twice in the same rhizome. Eden is a temporary autonomous zone, essence alone is permanent. Therefore it is not a renewal, it is the same wine in a new bottle or, as the Hebrew expression goes—the same lady under a different cloak, but the change of cloak is crucial, because the appearance of the gate is the thing that is in our hands to determine, and we are the ones who model the key's cuts and the ornaments on the gate's handle. The change of cloak renders the lady present. The change of cloak: the way we appear. We never looked better, but it wasn't in the past and there is nothing to reconstruct. The junction of

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

the past is needed only as a fine-tuning carrier wave; inside we still look our best, we just have to fine-tune to the essential frequency, and all the rest will fall into place because it has been there all the while, eternally. Something must be awakened in order to receive the frequency which broadcasts nonstop. Criticism is a psychophysical, psychosomatic, holistic system-wide response to the painful dormancy of the magical root. The journey to the Golden Heart Flower, to the garden gate's key, is thus a back-to-the-roots journey. Neither in time, nor in space, but in consciousness. Criticism is the response, the first step. It's time to take another step.

### 3

The elusive, ironic title of the exhibition, and its ostensibly apolitical declaration of intent—the desire to examine how official Zionist photographs would appear to someone who has come from Mars—both indicate the intricate, chaotic discourse in which the State of Israel is immersed, as well as the necessity and responsibility of even an official institute such as Beth Hatefutsoth, to ask fundamental questions in a real time of decadence, in an ongoing era of the last-days-of-Pompeii atmosphere, and if not in the physical-survivalist sense, then certainly on the ideological level. If it sometimes seems as though the discussion of post-Zionism or the claims about the disintegration of solidarity—the Zionist glue that has held Israeli society together, for better or for worse—is a marginal academic discourse, then the very feasibility of an ironic title, which conceals internalization of that which has indeed changed, proves that regardless of political view, we are factually living in an era of post, namely in a period following the all-embracing, total validity of Israel's formative myth. Just to make things clear—myth is not synonymous with lie, fiction, or fantasy. Myth, or meta-narrative in postmodern jargon, or a profound, collective sense of intrinsic justice, is a basic component of

the human experience, which the beholder deems alternately necessary, essential, inevitable, or dangerous. When an official state institute is either able or enables a lateral view on the values for whose sake it was founded, it is an encouraging sign that there are organizations in Israel that do not rigidly and fearfully cling to the past, but rather strive to maintain a dynamism and a space for development and reorganization vis-à-vis the brutality of the struggle between cow sanctifiers and their slaughterers, a struggle with a cruelty coefficient that inevitably becomes stronger once we realize that it is a battle at the foot of a cracked altar. The strengthening of Avigdor Lieberman and the extreme right in the recent Israeli elections does not indicate a return to ideology and to Zionism; rather it attests to the panic of a sectarian society in which no group is willing to share in the collective burden, yet wishes to gain the most at the other's expense in an atmosphere of a captain-less ship, sinking or running aground. The exaggerated linkage drawn by Lieberman between loyalty and citizenship shows, like the title of the show, that the basic values are no longer self-evident, that there is no glue, no myth. The difference between the “no loyalty no citizenship” slogan and the title of the show is the difference between a short-sighted fear and a perspective that makes for an attempt to understand what has changed. Beth Hatefutsoth's readiness for an essentially ‘post’ discourse, its wholehearted entry into a post-narrative realm without an aggressive automatic reflex reaction, is a call for a profound, intricate discussion even to sworn opponents, radicals, and iconoclasts. The self-reckoning is due on both sides, and herein lies the deep significance of this exhibition. The postmodern desire to shatter the myth, underlain by the assumption that a myth by definition is a type of opiate for the masses, shoots itself in the foot. Claude Lévi-Strauss, to the contrary, declared several decades ago that racism cannot be eradicated, but only contained, curbed, regulated, because it is a necessary byproduct of the modern national ethos.<sup>4</sup> His assertion implies that while life in the light of myth is not risk-free, it is

<sup>4</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, 1952, *Race and Culture*, 1971

the denial or rejection of its very necessity, or a Marxist-rationalist argument that the myth is necessarily a cynical apparatus of deception, that dissociates the rebels, regardless of how pure their intents are, from the backbone of any collective human experience. The act of knocking any myth whatsoever is not only intellectually wrong, it also, to borrow populist jargon, disconnects the rebels from the people—it voluntarily withdraws from the most important discursive field, leaving it to forces which are indeed cynical and scheming, thus giving rise to a self-fulfilling prophecy—the work with myth remains in the hands of the architects of brutal capitalism and all those demanding “a strong leader who will bring order.” In every period of ideological crisis in the history of the 20th century, the void was filled by tyrants—and much of the responsibility for this is attributable to the democratic elements which respond with an allergic reaction, washing their hands off the myth game, thus a-priori surrendering in the most important battle—the battle for peoples’ acknowledgement, consciousness, and heart.

The importance of the discourse initiated by the exhibition lies in the fact that it outlines a third way where people who have taken part in the constitution of the Zionist myth may meet with a disillusioned generation that realizes that it is impossible to criticize in the lack of a shared foundation which has existed in the past between center and margin in Israel. The shared foundation is the condition as well as the hope for change and vitality, as opposed to cynicism, passivity, or a-priori surrender to power-mongering. It is also important to note that the exhibition does not operate in a discursive vacuum. Oscillating between the intuitive and the conscious, it echoes contemporary wings of the postmodern discourse, which try to employ the crucial, critical conclusions at the core of this discourse—centered on the declaration of the death of narratives—and propose models for what may fill the void, a practice which also necessarily leads to a brave attempt to understand the essence of the space and of that which filled it until recently. Let us first examine the essence of

the maneuver proposed by the exhibition, and subsequently address previous processes in postmodern thought and projects that have realized these processes in the cultural-artistic field in the Western world, as well as the buds of similar trends in the Israeli art world.

Before touching upon the contents of the exhibition, its title, as aforesaid, begs to be discussed. The irony inherent in the declaration is immediate and need not be implied. Such a conclusive statement in the contemporary discursive realm cannot be taken at face value, and here already the process offers complexity—since it postulates in advance, rightfully, that the discursive glue unifying the curators of the exhibition, its contemporary artists, the hosting institute, and the visitors is the collective understanding that a glue no longer exists. That no one today is entitled to say we “never looked better” and really mean it, and gain unquestioning, unconditional consent or identification. Thus, since it is clear to everyone that this is a cliché, and that it cannot be applied to the present, a tragic aspect, or at least a melancholic one, verging on the nostalgic, is added to the title. This is where the conceptual significance lies, as also manifested in the content of the exhibition. Because the title looks back, and it says two things at once. On the one hand, cynical disillusionment—a gaze which oscillates between scorn and compassion for the period in which we really thought we looked our best, in which we felt we were at our prime. On the other hand, an ambivalent, conflicted nostalgia. The title indeed seems to say that we never looked better than we did in the Sonnenfelds’ photographs. Why did we look so good? Because we believed in the rightness of our cause. Because we had a narrative. That is to say, the postmodern emphasis on visibility and appearance, on form, looks back and reveals an integral, rather than a fragmentary, era: the visibility was not a semblance, but rather a sequential aesthetic continuation of an essence. We looked good because we were whole. We looked good because we *were* good. In retrospect, outside the narrative Eden from which we were banished,

and wherefrom we expelled ourselves in an inevitable process, one cannot deny the magical appeal of the time in which we looked our best. Denial or quasi-denial can only occur after the fall, in the cruel rational space, strewn with the corpses of sacred cows. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge of the recognition of that which didn't have justice by its side, the recognition of evil, is necessary, but it leads to tragedy if it is joined by denial of the aforesaid appeal. It leads to individualistic chaos and straying on the edge of the abyss of addictive consumerism or a yearning for totalitarianism. Consumerism, however, will never satiate spiritual hunger, and totalitarianism is a disastrous substitute for totality; and myths of freedom, peace, and justice are akin to windblown leaves without the myth of belonging. The title of the exhibition, in conclusion, indicates simultaneously the narrative schism and an integral past in which visibility was at its prime because it shone with the precious radiance of intrinsic justice.

The conceptual exercise of the exhibition, the question posited to the participating artists: "How would you have read the photographs had you come from Mars?", the invitation to read the Sonnenfelds' stately, awe-filled body of work based on a *tabula rasa*, is not an apolitical student-like trick. It enables a specific, meticulous commentarial state. Everyone knows that there is no such thing as a *tabula rasa*, and that the very request to pretend there is, is absurd, and hence is based on an expectation to uncover precisely the subjective baggage shared, or not shared, by contemporary Israeli artists. The effort to imagine a distance from the Zionist aesthetic enables a cleaner examination of its symbolical and emotional legacy. Second and even more important, the invitation to a *tabula rasa* neutralizes the shooting-from-the-hip responses and the oppositionary-critical reflexes, literally forcing a profound, inquisitive, ambivalent gaze, an eye-of-the-storm of reexamination. Whether consciously or not, this invitation conceals the recognition that the narrative is not the thing that has disappeared from the world. It is we who have disappeared—we who

were banished from this place. All one needs in order to realize the truth of this reversal is an invitation for a view from "Mars." This elimination of heaps of distractions caused by various *Zeitgeists* gives rise to works that echo in the space of Beth Hatefutsoth something very specific. They echo a forgotten, forlorn continuity. They echo a larger-than-life aesthetic power that has been buried under the banality of life, like the reverberations of an overwhelming dream, that accompanies us long into wakefulness even if we do not remember all its details, and if we allow it, it leaves a miraculous, otherworldly fingerprint on our actions. This is the most profound Nietzschean-Heideggerean mystical, symbolical interpretation that may be attached, with a spot of overzealousness, to the title of the show. *We never* (מעולם, *me-olam*) looked better, that is to say—an echo *from a world* (מעולם) in which we looked our best. An invocation of the memory of a blurry dream. Eden—we've been there once.

I would like to return momentarily back from Mars to Earth. The five commentarial projects featured in the exhibition present different facets of that twilight standing between the past and the present. Michael Blum's calendar represents the least "Martian" pole of the exhibition. It is infected by a bite from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but at the same time, it does so with poetical restraint, with a near-stoic overview that acknowledges the suffering inflicted on the other (the local Arab but also the Jewish immigrant) in the process of the establishment of the State of Israel, but without denying the legitimacy of at least some of the Zionists' motivations. Blum's calendar presents almost comically (a very subtle comicality, though) a type of silent astonishment of the Arabs in view of the Zionist symbols fluttering with European majesty foreign to the desert landscape. The tragic quality of the clash between Arabs and Jews is thus presented with neither denial nor blurring, but also without defiance or an unequivocal political agenda. On the other side of the alien scale is Ilya Rabinovich; the ruthless, radical hyper-objectivity of his photographs of public and official state institutions a years-long specialty and obsession, a

unique ability utterly necessary for this exhibition. Rabinovich does not have to imagine he has come from Mars, because he has always photographed as if he were Mr. Spock. The effect he obtains in his photographs is genius in its simplicity. He takes the same ceremonial, all-encompassing, general, functional bureaucratic angles of official-state documentation, but unlike a recruited photographer, he does not intervene in the space before the lens in any way. He does not fix anything, does not beautify anything, leaving no dissonance out of the frame. Thus, his photographs serve as the most decisive evidence for the waning of the narrative which these very institutions once presented. The institutions in Rabinovich's work are always unpopulated and ghostly, and the relationships in the frame are always spun between the "net" structure and a series of subsequent interventions, invasions, and environmental damages, whether due to neglect and degeneration, or to occupation of the official space by the consumerist space. In the photograph of the Opera House featuring the psychotic smile of the helium balloon, the invasion is symbolized in a way which simultaneously presents a disconcerting, tragic, threatening current truth while eliciting loud laughter which echoes in the exhibition space.

The video piece by **Yossi Attia** and **Itamar Rose**, who documented the "man in the street" speculating out loud what stands behind several select pictures from the Sonnenfeld Collection, is the simplest, clearest illustration in the exhibition of a projection of personal baggage on photographs with a symbolical-historical air and weight. The range of responses faithfully represents the present era—from quintessentially individualistic fragmentation through projection of a personal story as representative of national consciousness to attempts to imitate and emulate the echoes of the narrative itself, which are oblivious to all the little traps inherent in the language, formulation, and tone which give away the fact that we never looked more banal (naturally, the home video aesthetic only reinforces this sense. That is to say, it literally heightens it—the form, appearance, and feel of a technology accessible to any individual

generate a fragmentation and broadcast it at the same time. Video kills the myth that the citizens documented in the film recite the moment it remains come out of their mouths). Yochai Avrahami's work is a fascinating model of an integrative approach. He extracts personal, individual biographies from the Sonnenfeld Collection; the content of the stories themselves is incorporated with moving sensitivity into the narrative in which those figures operated—and the staging of the stories in the space itself is an installation which in its entirety is a tribute to statehood in its noble, authoritative-museal, sanctifying sense. This time, however, the glorious presentation is dedicated not to the enterprise, but to the individuals who operated within it: a mesmerizing, at once sentimental and critical act of conceptual equilibrium. By the same token, the computerized desk (created by curators Eilat and Danon) offering the viewer an interactive classification grid for the Sonnenfeld Collection takes the official raw material, serving it in a democratic manner, adapted to each individual viewer, thus elegantly balancing between the past and the present. Yael Bartana restaged and re-photographed images of workers, farmers, and soldiers from the *Yishuv* (pre-state) period in what may initially appear to be a vain fashion production in a capricious world of entertainment in which every form is robbed and violated for momentary pleasure; to all appearances, Bartana, more than any other artist in this show, proves the death of narrative. Hers, however, is not a fashion shoot, since the act of reconstruction is faithful and meticulous enough to baffle. Taking a closer, yet still initial look, upon entering the space, and before acquainting oneself with the nuances, the viewer cannot tell whether the photographs are new or old. They mainly look like carefully selected photographs of the period—as if someone gathered photographs which accidentally underscore the depicted individual in a manner uncharacteristic of period photographs. A peek at the credits attached to the photographs reveals that not only are these contemporary reenactments, but also that some of these beautifully typical pioneers are, in fact, Arabic.

Yet Bartana, like Avrahami and Blum, evades the trap of automatic defiance. Instead, she captures the narrative itself for her own benefit, encrypting herself within it like a hacker who conceals a virus in a message promising a pecuniary reward or nude pictures. When the true content is revealed, it is already too late. It goes without saying that in both cases—Avrahami’s and Bartana’s—we are obviously concerned with much more than a Trojan horse in the Beth Hatefutsoth space. The aesthetic precision of both projects must emerge from a minimal position of identification and enchantment; of recognition of the essential beauty of the narrative with whose findings and traces they work. Their criticism, or personal stamp, is effective precisely because it is served with a Zionist aesthetic; not with parodic scorn, but rather with awesome reverence and indulgence on detail. The early Zionists often had their pictures taken in local Arab garb, in a Western act of exotic, naïve, pre-colonialist romanticism, before the severity of the conflict eradicated the aesthetic space which made it possible. Today Bartana can present Arabs dressed as Zionists with a type of neo-naïveté which also indicates that we dwell in an interim period that makes it possible. A paradigmatic junction. One path leads to Eden, the other to perdition.

## 4

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in reference to various projects by the NSK (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*, New Slovenian Art) Collective,<sup>5</sup> defined the work mode also employed by Bartana and Avrahami as “over-identification.” He maintained that overt criticism of the values of the hegemonic center is not as effective as an act of masquerading which radicalizes these very same values while planting aesthetic and ideological booby-traps into them. Žižek argues that “to be more stately than the state” (or, if you will, to introduce a quasi-naïve imitation of a state aesthetics, as if you have just come from Mars) is the effective subversive

5 Laibach, “*A Film from Slovenia*,” directors: Daniel Landin and Peter Vežjak, 1993.

act, since the comics-like radicalization exposes the “hidden reverse,” namely, the bare intention behind the aesthetic-ideological guise.

NSK’s design section (called “Novi Kolektivizem,” or NK) was the first to efficiently employ the tactic of over-identification. A poster of their design won first prize in a state competition for a poster to commemorate the *Dan mladosti* (“Youth Day” on May 25) in still-communist Yugoslavia. The scandal erupted as soon as it turned out that the chosen image was borrowed from a Nazi poster.<sup>6</sup> NSK designers thus exposed the totalitarian impulse shared by the communist and Nazi regimes, the latter’s defeat by the former serving as one of the formative myths of expanding communism. At the same time, it was the musical section of NSK (Laibach) that attracted fire. Their performances were banned in their homeland until 1987. Laibach constantly blended communist, fascist, and Nazi motifs, as well as motifs drawn from modernist art movements, mainly Suprematism and Futurism, with the addition of a pinch of popular Volkist elements. This aesthetic wrapped aggressive, bombastic music typified by military beats and Wagnerian orchestrations. At the same time, all these were implemented, for example, in cover versions for pop and rock hits by successful Western bands such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Queen. The cabaret-like, parodic-absurd element in their work indeed eluded the authorities, who were horrified by the totalitarian mirror which Laibach set before them.

It is important to note a fundamental difference between the subversive over-identification of Žižek and Laibach, and the more subtle, intricate identification of Avrahami and Bartana (Rabinovich may also be marked on the scale of over-identification and given a special place of honor as the producer of ‘over-objectivity,’ for exposing the literal and symbolical cracks in the official architecture itself with his cold gaze, in a manner which, as aforesaid, may be funny or unsettling, somewhat reminiscent of the way in which David Lynch extracts horror from the space itself in his frames). Over-

6 [www.nskstate.com/nk/poster\\_scandal.php](http://www.nskstate.com/nk/poster_scandal.php).

identification according to the aggressive-subversive Žižekian model has existed, and continues to exist, in Israeli art. The stately monumentalism of the 1990s installations by Erez Harodi and Nir Nader was planned and designed to criticize the center by duplicating its aesthetic mechanisms of authority. The performance group Public Movement is at present the most vociferous and most distinctive example of a tactic of over-identification. Their use of youth movements, IDF, and various state apparatus' ritualistic aesthetics—when all of them are harnessed for a vacuum centered on a flag which represents itself alone, the idea of the flag; when the rituals are constantly interrupted by landmines of sex and violence both disturbing and exciting; when the only contemporary experiences generating a sense of togetherness, namely terrorist attacks and road accidents, join the list of collective aesthetic Zionist experiences—all these generate an elusive, wild, complex mechanism of over-identification lamenting the evil at the system's heart, but also the loss of the ability to take part in its rituals out of love and identification. Indeed, despite Žižek's explanations, it is not hard to identify this yearning (verging on fetishism) in the works of Laibach, who always emphasize, in the midst of their contradiction and booby-trap-ridden conceptual bombardment, that they are not mere iconoclasts, and that there is a positive, present, eternal essence, as abstract and mysterious as it may be, in which they believe.

The grandeur of over-identification declares that the emperor is naked (or that the lady has no cloak), and the tactic of over-identification is possible only at the time when the narrative is waning, because only then a beautiful and exciting copy may be created which looks better than the original (we never looked better—here, perhaps, the title may, after all, refer to the present. The embracing yet conscious reconstruction is more beautiful than the banal mechanism desperately clinging to the signs of aesthetic force which no longer shines constantly from the eternal flame of inner justice). Indeed, the exhibition under discussion and the activity of NSK share the comprehension

of dramatic junction periods in the histories of their respective nations. NSK began operating in the year in which Yugoslavian leader Tito died. This fact suffices to establish the argument that the comparison to the practice in Israel and in this exhibition is important not only for the purpose of intellectual discussion, but also in order to inquire: what kind of dramatic disintegration do the buds of the over-identification tactics herald in Israel? And more importantly, what hints of a new synthesis are concealed in the works of Avrahami and Bartana? As hinted in the first, more psychedelic part of this text, criticism is the first step; let us add that both in its direct-pure form and in the guise of over-identification, it is typical of twilight times, of the dark recesses of Kali Yuga before the birth of a new cycle. The bridges built in this exhibition between past and present, the dialogue between the dream and its shattering, the searching which does not hesitate to display nostalgia for the forms which enabled us to look better, to feel better, to be better—an investigation which does not hesitate to demonstrate love for them—these put us into a frequency of cognition (one which identifies permanent essences, wormholes which link a secular linear time with a sanctified dream time, mundane realization with constitutive, creating form) that will lead us to the model that will inherit over-identification: re-identification, transformation of the past and remembrance of the future, reclaiming ownership of the forms appropriated by totalitarianism and subsequently by capitalism, fresh and brave re-entry into the most important battlefield in the experiential landscape of human collectives—the mythical battlefield and its powerful aesthetic.

***the leni & herbert sonnenfeld  
photo collection***

**Selected Photographs**