

“Any sense of liberty can only be meaningful if it is set against a wall”, an interview with Roe Rosen in the context of his participation in documenta 14

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EO: How was the process of growing up in Israel for you, experiencing how masculinity is constructed there, while being progressively more conscious about your critical position towards that?

RR: I think that partly, even as a child, you are intuitively aware of certain things being constructed, and you feel that you are not compelled or convinced by them. In Israel there was a growing sense of a kind of virile, militant and patriotic masculinity, which was very much put forth in opposition to the image of the diasporic Jew. That Jew was passive, learned, religious, docile, not combative, and therefore could be killed. I grew up in the 1960s and the '70s, so I was four years old when the Six-Day War happened, and it was followed by a huge military euphoria, praise of military power and local patriotism. I remember being totally detached from this image and more in tune with what I perceived to be this, let's call it 'victimized Jew of the *Shtetl*', of the villages of Eastern Europe, which was also imaginary of course. I did not have any authentic first-hand experience of it, but it was a kind of fantasy that also had to do, maybe, with the identification with my father, who was a child in Europe during the Holocaust.

Later, when you grow up, you begin to contextualize these intuitive feelings into a more intellectualized, researched-based consciousness of how these things actually evolve. But the other point that I want to make is that when my work [*Live and Die as Eva Braun*, 1995-1997] was first shown and knowing that it was going to be polemical in Israel, it was crucial for me not to play the card of being the son of a survivor. I did not want it to appear as if this fact gives me a special privilege to be more bold or provocative, or to have any kind of permission, because I thought that what the project had to offer should be viable as part of the discussion and a bodily experience regardless of this fact. When the polemics erupted it was so aggressive that during one live radio interview a politician called me a Holocaust denier, and then I said, I cannot be a denier, my father is a Holocaust survivor. So from that point on it became an explicit aspect, there was no point in artificially covering it.

EO: And how did the reception of that work influence your subsequent decisions about what to show and how to show your work?

RR: I don't know that it did, because it was a shock. In 90% of the cases we visual artists are quite protected, as provocative and risk-taking as we may be. There might be direct confrontation with aggressive politicians, like Vladimir Putin against Pussy Riot, but to have a public debate which plays out in the mainstream media, that goes into the details of the position that you are engaged in, also aggressively, is not an experience most of us have had. It was shocking, but it was not something that I felt was wrong. I knew that it was not going to happen with each and every piece that I do, but I think that politicians attack an artwork when they think they are going to gain something from it.

The importance of the Holocaust in Israeli discourse is at the heart of it, because it's a political issue that not only addresses how we can speak about it, but also how can it serve as some kind of political instrument of leverage that justifies military violence. If you assume the position of the victim—"I'm a Holocaust survivor who came to Palestine"—, then of course you will defend yourself. Even though there is a mighty army who is fighting a minority, you are in fact in a victim-position.

The Holocaust has a national aspect, an educational aspect... There are multiple layers to the instrumentalization of this collective trauma. I knew it was likely that my work would be contested, because at that particular time in Israeli history, the Holocaust issue was having a political revival. In the nineties a lot of survivors were still alive and some of them were politicians. There is this strange bifurcation in Israel's awareness; on the one hand there is a lot of silence and things that are left undiscussed, and on the other hand it's a culture with an almost necrophilic consumption of the Holocaust, to an extent that it's almost pornographic. My project suddenly appeared within this dichotomy, demanding from Israeli spectators to consider the possibility that the victimizer is within them, instead of the other way around. By considering the victimizing potential that you have in you, you are denied the relatively easy identification with the victim, and the relationship is disavowed in favour of something that is fragmented, self-contradictory and potentially morally corrupt. It was a very uneasy project for Israelis at this point in time.

EO: You studied philosophy and comparative literature and then made a transition to the visual arts, how was this process for you?

RR: I didn't experience it as a transition, because I began to write and draw when I was a

very young child and I went to an art school that was well known, but I was arrogant and a megalomaniac. I was certain about my capacities as an artist, I felt that I didn't need to study art, that I needed to study other things such as literature and philosophy. Then at a certain point I was juggling my work as a waiter with studying and doing my own work as an artist, and I felt it was impossible. So after an intense commitment to philosophy I went to New York to study Visual Arts, but it never felt like a real shift. Another quality I had early on and that I could later explain intellectually, was the feeling that there is something artificial in specialization. I don't mean that you don't need to be an expert at what you do, you definitely do. If you make a painting or use a language you should do it at a very high level and set yourself criteria, but I can't see a reason to limit yourself to one medium of expression.

This seemed false to me, especially when I perceive the efforts of the high modernists (because of course there are alternative modernisms such as Dada and Surrealism). If you think about the genealogy and discourse of abstraction, it was about purity, minimal economy, less is more. You have to specialize in your own medium and also find your 'idiom', and the prime example is perhaps American abstraction.

My sensibility was almost in opposition to that, a sensibility of excess, of abundance and of minor positions. What I mean is to be interested in illustration as much as in oil on canvas; in comics and pop music as much as in classical music; in television... To see culture as a fabric that denies a clear hierarchy. Because it was intuitively felt I used both popular culture and high culture as models or sources of inspiration. Part of popular culture at that time was about gender fluidity, masquerading, denying the opposition of authenticity and artificiality, and so on. Even though I was quite alone in what I was doing, I did not feel that way. I felt there was a community or a world out there that provided a context for positions like mine.

EO: It was interesting that you mentioned David Bowie yesterday,¹ because when I looked at your website and was checking the story of *A Different Face* (2000), suddenly he appeared to me. The face of the character resembles the face of the girl from *Hilarious* (2010) as well the old cartoon character the Yellow Kid, and I thought about Pippi Longstalking too... It was exciting to find all these different references from pop culture. In

1

Confessions (2008) there is a pile of books and a fluidity of codes that are in dialogue, like at the end of the credits of *Hilarious* with the printed t-shirts. I'm also interested in how to avoid this separation between what is supposedly high culture and low culture, and between mass culture and the art world. It's like going all the way from a fluidity of identities to embrace flexible positions within cultural codes as well...

RR: Just to complicate things a bit more, I can say that flexibility is a word that I find very ambivalent because what I do also has a strict or ascetic quality that goes against the grain of some things... If freedom or flexibility are to be attained, it can't happen easily. People like Paul Preciado know this from their personal experience, they know that if they want to elasticize their identity, they will have to confront different systems. In art that there must be an analogous difficulty if you really manage to attain something that is flexible. It's not just the same as being able to watch or do everything, which is what new age and capitalism allow us to do. You know, with cable tv you can flip through the channels and identify with the weather report or a stand-up comedian, and believe that by doing so you are being flexible.

I think that any sense of liberty or flexibility only can be meaningful if it is set against a wall, against something that tries to block you; those are the places where flexibility has to be negotiated and attained. Those walls are also internal, so to challenge your own notions of flexibility you have to ask yourself, where am I not flexible? Where don't I want to be flexible? What is my difficulty when I think about the borders of my identity? For this reason, my works are in a liminal moral zone, a zone where questions don't always have clear or singular answers. There are often several answers that exists simultaneously. It's very abstract because we are talking about all-encompassing principles for a position, but of course it becomes concrete with each given premise.

EO: I am interested in this rigor, because I see you are in control of every small detail in your works. How do you decide what needs to be controlled? What happens when you notice that there's something out of control, something that surprises you in the process?

RR: In many of my works research is crucial, not only in the intellectual but also in the visual sense, because they engage with a history of making things and visualizing things. I did a research project on the artist Justine Frank, whose work can be historically situated in the context of Surrealism, but also in the painterly tradition of Palestine, where she moved, and in French literature tradition as well, because she was a

pornographer, and there was a very rich tradition of pornographic French literature. There are also other histories, such as the history of the representation of women, of the Jew and anti-Semitism, the history of Zionism, so all those histories have to be considered alongside the position of art making.

I did not want to fabricate her as a Surrealist, because I did not want to totally disavow myself, but rather create a meeting point where the work would be absolutely realistic for a woman who lived in the 1920s or the '30s. It had to be attained on the level of minute detail, because the idea was not only to fabricate a character, but to create someone whose historical position makes it possible to claim she was real. Even if she's not real, she makes a viable claim, she should be real. This requires a lot of work. It necessitates intensive labour and time-consuming engagement, which in the art world is not to be taken for granted, because we live in a very hectic community, the profession demands you to often show new work. A piece like *Justine Frank* takes five years to fabricate, so I took a five-year break, I didn't show anything for five years, which is a big price to pay, but I think it is necessary to attain things like that.

Vladimir's Night (2011-2014) is another example of a fictional character, and he was Russian. I didn't speak Russian, so I felt that I had to begin by learning Russian, because he also wrote and I had to write Cyrillic as part of the illustrations. Concerning your question about mistakes or the things that you don't control, the demand that I put on myself is really crazy, because you cannot really consume Russian in three years, it's impossible. Walter Benjamin wrote that if you are not Russian you mustn't even dare to write about Russian culture, and he was much smarter than I am, so mistakes invariably happen. Most of the schemes that I create already have a mistake as an innate condition. For example, in *The Blind Merchant* (1989-1991) Charlotte is blind, so the drawings on stage are blind drawings, then there are obvious mistakes; the eye appears outside of the face...

In *Confessions*, if the confessors do not speak Hebrew and read a transliteration, they're bound to make mistakes. They make very interesting mistakes. Instead of saying "the corpses are rotten" which is the original Hebrew, someone said "the cheese is rotten". So very interesting displacements happen, and in retrospect everything seems tightly put together, but the process itself has its chaotic stages.

EO: Now that you have mentioned these works, and because you have been working for a long time with strategies of using different female characters or women that actually exist, to speak through them or add your words or gestures, I was wondering how you think

about these experiences in retrospect?

RR: I never saw it as a strategy. It is also a strategy to assume different positions, but it began in a very intuitive way. I think I wanted to be a woman as well as a man, or to be a third thing in between. I felt that art might allow for that to happen, so the initial realizations of those positions were kind of androgynous self-renditions, very much in the spirit of David Bowie. It became more 'strategic' as you say, with the *Martyr* paintings. I did a series of Christian martyrs, using close friends and often using gender reversal, men for women, women for men, and casting myself as a Christian woman. I was also engaging with history, albeit a Christian history with a particular geography and iconography, but from a Jewish position, like a saboteur, and from a feminine position. Then right after the *Martyrs* there was a book called *Lucy* (1991-1992), with a male protagonist that appears as a child and has a female name.

Only then came Justine Frank, as a kind of bona-fide outburst of female identity, and by the time I did *Confessions* it was an all-women affair, because after using so many female effigies it made sense that my confessions were only for the female gender. But I began to question if that had become a kind of a safe zone, and that's why the next fictive character was male.

EO: The first time I saw *Confessions* was after a talk about translation,² and translation is super important in that particular film. It made me wonder what your process of writing is like? How do you deal with thinking and writing, whether in Hebrew or English?

RR: I emigrated to New York City, lived there for twelve years and also got married to an American woman. I went there when I was 23 years old, quite young, but I was one of the oldest students in the BFA. I was very self-assured, I had already done some interesting works and had written a lot of texts in Hebrew. So language was definitely my identity and my home, but then I was in a place where people could not read it and they also couldn't care less because the context was so different.

It was a very crucial moment for me, and I asked myself, what is interiority without exteriority? How are the two negotiated? Why would someone else care about the things I

2

care about? What does it mean if they think more about the other or at least as much as I think about myself? It's also a position of becoming a double of yourself: you have two languages, and the relationship between them is very unstable.

For example, *The Blind Merchant* was a piece I did at a moment where I felt that I could only write theoretical texts in English, because I was studying art history in English, but poetical texts were something else. So I took the absolute paradigm of the British canon: Shakespeare, and sort of parasitically clung to his textual body, with my English which was very good, but it wasn't a language I was comfortable in, it was not a home.

Ever since then, I think that the employment of language is like all those other experiences which have multiple levels of existence and awareness and are never singular and cohesive. It gets very interesting when you use languages that you don't understand, like Russian. Although I studied and was working with Russian, it is a very difficult language and I didn't have the time to really immerse myself, so I put myself almost in the same position as the migrant workers in *Confessions*; speaking in the first person as a Russian, without understanding what they say. So there also was a degree of self-parody. The choice of language is a very interesting one, because the answer is never clear. It is always a question, to work in English or in Hebrew, and in fact I did both in different circumstances.

EO: How are your interests in Surrealism and psychoanalysis related? How can these different tools address an expanded way of living our desires? I'm not sure if tools is the word I'm looking for... There are these elements in your drawings that have a lot to do with sexuality and defying gender roles, and combine playfulness with a darker side. They relate to things addressed in psychoanalysis, like repression, and the way our culture removes us from a pre-symbolic world where, before we make our way through conventions, we are children who supposedly feel no pressure or boundaries regarding what may be enjoyed or desired.

RR: I am trying to imagine a pre-symbolic world where there are no borders... [laughs]. I think that the 'we' or the 'I' is very questionable, because I think that we are structured by impositions from outside, not only in terms of ideology or the proper way to behave or whatever, but also by things that are objectively true, like the distinction between masculine or feminine. I am one of those people who believe in what Kaja Silverman called "dominant fictions", because what men and women were 800 years ago was scientifically different from what they are now, but they were universally true for western

men and western human beings then. Only the truth changed, so she calls it dominant fictions.

There is no doubt that the notion of libido as a primal force that sublimates itself into other cultural forms was a dominant fiction of the twentieth century. This is only one example of the multiple, beautiful narratives that we invent that became very influential. They are more than simply tools, it's really reenacting something that's been imprinted on you, that becomes part of you. Lacan has this famous saying, "the unconscious is structured like a language", which might seem counterintuitive because it's supposed to be this pre-lingual free zone of forbidden desires that are repressed. So what does it mean that it is structured like a language? I think that Lacan is saying that our primordial ties are always already structured by the symbolic order, where language is the prime expression, perhaps the most important vehicle.

EO: We talked a lot about the importance of written language in your work, but what about your relation to music? It also seems to be pretty important in your videos, especially in the choice of the musicians' presence and visibility.

RR: I'm trying to be loyal to the notion of self-reinvention, self-questioning... I came very late to filmmaking, only in the mid 2000s. I've always been an avid viewer of moving images, but I was very disenchanted with the way that music and sound served as an ambiance, servient to the image, the text, or the narrative. I thought that music should be as much as a potent carrier of meaning as everything else in the film. If it's not substantially justified, you might as well not use it.

I still feel this way and I still really appreciate video art pieces and cinematic works in which music is not just supposedly making the experience more intense, what's scary scarier, or the funny thing funnier, like when the violin plays when you're supposed to be sad. That's not what I want at all. So it becomes another medium that I approach as I do writing and painting.

Even though I've been painting from an early age, and I love it and I think I do it quite well, I believe that painting has to be justified. It cannot just come to be. I don't know if this is a good position, because sometimes you should be more permissive, but it's the way I operate. For instance, *Vladimir's Night* can be perceived as an excuse to return to painting; because Komar-Myshkin was an illustrator I am allowed to sit and paint for three years. But this painting has to be revived under specific conditions, it has to belong to a Russian tradition, and be aware of Ilya Kabakov, and refer to other things that Roe Rosen

does... It also has to do with what I wasn't comfortable with, for instance the idea that gouache is kind of a stupid medium supposedly for children, but I really love it and Maxim Komar-Myshkin loves it as well.

I approach language in the same way: it's not very clear what the books I write are; they're like a machine that needs to invent itself afresh. *Justine Frank* is and isn't a novel, a biography, or an academical treaty; it's all of that and none of that, it's a hybrid. *Confessions* is a similar kind of text that is meant to be read without understanding, like a text-machine that operates in a different way. The piece I contributed to *South* magazine is an image-text-machine, a double text in which I circled letters, so when you read it you actually have two texts, one that is the complete text and one text of the circled letters. Something similar happens with music in my work: I love it and I want to use it, but there needs to be a justification for it, which changes from one film to the next.

The presence of musicians is another issue. First of all, I think it is very potent to show the people that actually produce the sounds as part of the image of the film. *The Dust Channel* (2016) assumes a more radical position, because of the question whether, for example, people from Sudan and Eritrea should portray the infiltrators of the house. It was an important decision to have the musicians acting all the roles, which meant they often had more than one role and played both invaders and maid servants, police men and themselves as musicians.

It's also a way to disavow being in the position to allow the victim to be seen... It's a problematic issue and so it was clear to me, early on, that I wanted the setting to be the world of the homeowner, which is being infiltrated. I didn't want it to be a collaboration with the person who is supposedly the infiltrator; the refugee... It was very important to me that it was not like a project by an activist or a conscious artist who reaches out to the refugee, but that it was about reflecting on the making of the consciousness of the one who lives in the country that is 'infiltrated'. That's why the musicians play all the roles.

EO: I also want to ask you how you decide when to address things that are going on directly, I mean contemporary, complex problems? What drives you to address them in an explicit way?

RR: It's funny because I always saw myself as very self-indulgent, narcissistic, dealing with philosophy, poetry and psychology more than sociology, economy and politics directly... But I was experiencing a kind of argument within myself which led to a point where I looked back and was surprised to realize that my work was highly political.

The Blind Merchant is about the trauma of Judaism in Europe. It's not addressing the Holocaust at all, but goes back to Elizabethan times in England and the canonical image of the Jew of Shylock, that later leads to a tradition of how Jews are represented. Attentive people could see that the trauma of the diaspora is in there too.

With *Eva Braun* I got to the point of becoming really explicit, addressing something that is politically and historically very explosive and central, and doing it head-on. It was like diving into deep water, because I really understood the people who avoided this topic, many good artists avoid it, and I hated almost everyone who did touch it because that often entailed strategies that I thought were corrupted. So it was a very risky place to go and I decided to go there. I wasn't young anymore...

I never tackled such issues directly in the works I made after, it always came from a structure or a formal or poetic machinery. For example, for *Confessions* the starting point wasn't illegal immigration, it was thinking about speaking a language that you do not speak. When you do that you have a kind of double voice, so the perfect thing to betray myself would be confession, because my whole project was anti-confessional. Only then did I think of the right people to carry this out with alongside the building blocks of my biography, because I wanted to create a hybrid in terms of content, so that the sentences could be spoken by an aging male Jewish artist, and by an illegal female migrant. The whole text is structured like that, and it becomes very political.

I think that language and the body are already political to an extent and that it is a question of how conscious or alert we are to the political import that they carry. In many cases the political aspects of an artwork also have a strange relation to temporality. I began doing the Putin project [the works devoted to the Russian artist Komar-Myshkin] before Putin was in his second term, and nobody was speaking about him. Russians of course knew he would be back in power, it was quite clear. I felt, however, that I was going into territory that really interested me, but didn't interest many people. Then, because the project took time to realize, Putin was in his second term when the work was presented and everyone was talking about him. But when the project was conceived it wasn't about tackling Putin head-on. It undoubtedly deals with post-communist manifestations of power in the neoliberal setting and what constitutes that kind of construction of power, that's a crucial part of Vladimir's time. But paranoia is also a crucial part, and beauty, and the Russian migration to Israel. There are many different layers and one of them is this kind of global political precaution, but it was not strategically set up as the main problem that I wanted to tackle. It doesn't work like that, it can be a good way to work, but it is not the way that it happens to me.

EO: Where does your desire of giving life to inanimate objects come from?

RR: It has always been there in my work and it's there in Freud with the notion of fetishism as an excessive libidinal desire that's directed to words and objects, which he connects to masochism. The notion of the *unheimlich* or the uncanny has had a strong presence in my work from early on, although I only realized it later through working with Anselm Franke, a curator with a propensity for animism.

We looked at nineteenth century anthropology and the practice of separating the rational West from the irrational other, the primitive, or the child who still believes that stones can speak and the rain falls because it wants to and doesn't make a binary division between subject and object, self and other. When Anselm initiated his project on animism and invited me, it was the point of entry for *Vladimir's Night*, but there were many living objects in my work before that. There are also many artists who influenced me, such as Mike Kelley, who not only uses soft toys as fetishistic objects that are partly alive, but also did a big show called *The Unheimlich*. So I'm certainly not the only one working with this notion.

I can speak about it in general but it comes out differently in each specific project, and in the case of the Komar-Myshkin project it's important to consider this essay by the Russian structuralist Sergei Tretyakov on the biographies of objects. In the Russian context this was a very important text that privileged the object over the subject as a literary topic and was a way to bring class relations to the surface, because Tretyakov thought that centring on subjects suppresses class relations. For example, if we don't write about Natasha or Sergei, but instead about the piano in the room, then we begin with the assembly line: how was the piano made? That was its birth, right? So then you're already considering workers and factories, wood and money. That specific project highlighted the liminal zone between object and subject, but a lot of animism could already be discerned in *Eva Braun*...

EO: How do you see the *Eva Braun* work, here at *documenta 14*, twenty years after you first showed it and in such different exhibition conditions and in this particular context which is *documenta* held in Athens?

RR: I don't know if I have something intelligent to say about it, but for lack of better words: it is really moving me, because I had a lot of doubts over the past five, six years... The

work was shown in London a few years ago and in Tel Aviv last year where I had a kind of a retrospective, and in both contexts I could not sense a strong reaction and I had the feeling that it might have to do with time, the fact that the Second World War was so long ago, many people are already dead, there's an apathy...

Now I am very moved, first of all because Adam Szymczyk insisted on showing the work, also because of the particular context of the Benaki Museum where historical narratives and minor or strange speculations are put together, and I'm also moved by the viability of the work. Maybe it's my impression, but it is a very effective installation with an element of surprise. Norman L. Kleeblatt, who curated the polemical show *Mirroring Evil* at the Jewish Museum in New York in the early 2000s which caused a great outcry because it showed Nazi imagery in contemporary art,³ came here during the preview days and said, "you never showed these pieces, they are new!" It's great and really surprising that this work can appear as if it was made only yesterday.