

***Eyal Segal | Release: Return, 2015 | Phd. Lili Boros***

Since the spatial turn that has occurred in numerous fields of science, space – as a construction created and brought to life by the movement of the human body – has received considerable attention. This is especially true for cultural-political situations where observations directed at the landscape and the built environment point to unresolved historical issues, as it is the case for Israel. In recent decades, a notable number of artworks and exhibitions have addressed the manufacturing and conquering of physical and cultural spaces, as well as the power exercised over – or through – these, bringing to the foreground social and political connections.

In the videos of young, Israeli-born artist Eyal Segal, physical space not only serves as an almost exclusive departure point for dialogue (with both the self and the audience), but also explores memory, the legacy of the past and the possibility of self-understanding. In other words, the artist seeks out “memory places” (“lieux de mémoire”, Pierre Nora); events occur in spaces that manifest as a system of relationships encompassing various – in the Foucauldian sense, heterogeneous – places that bring into play social, national-historical, local and global contexts. As it is suggested by the title of the present exhibition, the artist’s activity can be grasped through the concept of returning, even if it is a place he has never been to before. As a third-generation Holocaust survivor, he seeks out places that carry meaning in terms of ancestral or collective memory, where he either records a repetitive action of a unique aesthetic or, as the protagonist of the scene, fills the symbolically loaded (living-) space. He creates personal memorials of sorts, which mark the place of remembering in people (Jochen Gerz).

Approaching the works from the history of video art, Eyal Segal employs gallery installation forms that have, by now, become standard. He uses the multichannel and installational arrangements of motion pictures as “a law unto himself” in the sense that, instead of regarding the medium itself from a critical standpoint, he places it in the service of what it seeks to communicate. Thus an organic relationship between the thematic of the artwork and the form of the installation can be established, as the videos projected on the floor and walls, as well as the flat screen monitors installed in a cube-like fashion, also double the individual elements of the videos in terms of form. In *Turgor*, the shape of the glass container is repeated by the back to back position of the monitors placed on plinth, thus – as has been the practice with video works documenting the artist’s performances – offering viewers the opportunity for identification.

In the video series entitled *Moon, Mars, Jupiter*, which was shot in Japan and which articulates an external – and thus observational – viewpoint, the effect of projecting the image on the floor and walls evokes in the viewer a sense of the physical space which ensures the temporality of perception, and stepping into which further disturbs the system of spatial relationships. In the video entitled *Columba Riot*, we see the artist at an abandoned site: in a silo that has never been used and is now inhabited by pigeons. In the enormous building of the multi-storey storage facility, the artist attempts to chase the birds away. The industrial – and, at the same time, surrealistic – environment, the activity of the artist and the interaction between nature and the silo make for a poetic and metaphoric effect, while the struggle to scare the birds away can be interpreted as an internal mental activity.

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Time Container seeks to explore personal memories through the story of the father who had formerly worked as a seaman. The juxtaposition of the two screens – the documentary-like presentation with an opposing, painterly portrayal of the seaport – represents the various layers of memory. At the same time, the duality of the diptych could also stem from the split attention of the artist during his visit: on the one hand, the father talking about his memories, on the other, the aesthetic spectacle of the seaport, the slow movement of the cranes. The film was shot in Ashdod, one of the most significant commercial ports of Israel, where the artist's father worked as a seaman when he was young. This is also where the Israeli politician Rafael Eitan died. The personal and collective stories are thus tied together by the place itself.

Similarly, in Turgor, the separateness of the past and the present is dissolved: the location of the unedited performance documentation, which was shot from a single camera position, is the park in front of the old city fortification of Zwinger in Münster, which once served as both a Nazi gaol and a Gestapo place of execution. (The artist's grandmother was born and spent her childhood in Münster.) The dramaturgy of the scene evoking a well-known form of torture, as well as Harry Houdini's Chinese Water Torture Cell, is provided by the fear of submersion apparent in the artist's face, his mimicry reflecting his struggle, and the singing voice of the grandmother, while, in the meantime, we see part of the structure of Zwinger in the background with cyclers riding and passers-by walking across the park loud with birdsong. The concept of turgor pressure – taken from biological terminology where it signifies the distension of plant tissue due to adequate fluid content – here alludes to the condition of being full of life and is a manifestation of the quality of absence characteristic of Holocaust representations, as well as the filling of space.

## ***Release and Return. Release in Return.***

### **| *Interview with Eyal Segal by Rona Cohen***

Rona Cohen: I would like to begin by referring to the title of your first exhibition “Falling into place”, I have the impression that in your works there is always something in the image (for example the container in Time Container, the aquarium in Turgor) which functions like an entrance to a “rabbit hole”. To experience your art the viewer has to follow you – in falling down a rabbit hole, in falling in place and into place, in time and in memory. It’s a strange expression “falling into place” it is like shaking the ground you are standing on so as to explore and disclose the archeological and historical layers underneath, falling into a memory. Indeed in one of your poems you speak of art in terms of opening a new door so as to allow the viewer into another world, another time, you say that the artist can only show the way, but it is for the viewer to “fall in place”. Is this how you see art and how you see the role of the artist?

Eyal Segal: Yes, for me a crucial part in my 'job' is to access these doors to other worlds and explore these parallel layers by finding details, scenes, or time fragments, and magnifying them for the viewer to experience in a poetic and tangible way. Sometimes, the places are far from the regular eye and everyday life, like the abandoned silo or a restricted port, but can also be common place like a tree in the desert in a touristy place like Wadi Rum or an 'act' in a promenade full of people. My role is to be a hunter of these moments that pass by all of us. Simply by placing the image in a frame, I have presented ‘this door’ to the viewer. In a way, the image is the first key to enter the 'rabbit hole'. Next, the viewer’s senses must continue the journey, all triggered through sound, spirit, memory, action, place and time. During the work process – and every time in a different way – I try to get the viewer to see and to feel these emotions as I had felt while making the video, to recreate the experience from the inside. The titles of the pieces provides another portal to the journey, often, through a play on words. The title “Falling into Place” evolved from the common saying: "everything is falling into place". With the elimination of the first part of the sentence, the common saying is converted to a more personal level as an invitation to the viewer. The title provides an open gate into what I felt when I found myself falling into these places.

RC: One of the strongest themes in your art which runs almost like a leitmotiv is man’s relationship with nature. You know, Jean-François Lyotard spoke of the Kantian sublime in terms of an aesthetic experience where nature no longer speaks to us through “coded forms”, in other words we are faced not only with the magnitude and force of nature which exceeds our grasp and our power of imagination but also with its otherness and strangeness. It seems to me that for you nature is both intriguing in its otherness but there is also a strong sense of commonality between man and nature. Even in your latest work “Moon, Mars, Jupiter trilogy” you address an exchange between humans, a loop where one releases something and – hopefully – something returns (“Release: Return”) where a circle has been established, in terms of the most fundamental “loop” in nature. Like in “falling into place” it seems that there is a moment we find ourselves always already in nature and art is a way of bringing this mode of existence into visibility. What do you find in this exchange between human and nature?

ES: To me, the connection between man and nature is unbreakable. I find nature and 'human nature' as two elements that are infinite and so are the relations between them. They are both going through these continuous cycles of change, but yet, never end the elements of nature, such as water, are the basic elements for life and death, therefore they can carry the most profound and poetic metaphors. The force of 'turgor pressure' is a nice example for that. In the video itself – there is a 'meeting point' with nature, human emotions, and history. The force of turgidity helps plants to maintain rigidity and to stand up. This pressure is similar to the pressure one's feels when his head is upside down in water. In the video, during the 'dive' you can hear a children song sung by my grandmother and the melodic chirping of birds. I sensed a similar theme in the last time I was in the Masada mountain watching this loop between the sun and the moon. The sun comes up from down below, from the belly of the Dead Sea, and lights the desert carpet. Concurrently, the moon is going down in the opposite side of the sky, and for a few minutes, they are equivalent – 'release in return'. In this brief and encompassing moment, sitting on the remains of history, I witnessed ancient human nature that had become integrated into the wild. A story of tragedy and bravery, fear and hope, and a meeting point of exchange between humans, mimicking this loop occurring in the sky – 'release and return'.

RC: So on the one hand there is the circle of nature and on the other hand there is the circle of human life, and in your works there is a form of intersection between them and one could say that through this intersection we come close to something authentic about human nature, a hybrid of body and language, if you will. But apart from that there is a strong theme of testimony in your work whether explicit like in Time Container or implicit like in Turgor, and in both cases it is not merely someone else's story that is being told such as we would find in a documentary, it is not a passive listener as it were, but how this story affects you, and how you bring it forth in your art. So in Time Container you choose to split the screen thus adding another 'channel' of impressions that works parallel to your father's story and in Turgor it is a scene of survival that you exhibit following your grandmother's memory. In a sense both are scenes of survival, the story of your father's survival in the water and afterwards your scene of 'survival' in the aquarium. Can you say more on the work-of-memory in your works?

ES: Memory is maybe our biggest asset, equal to our senses. In her last years, my grandmother had Alzheimer's disease. As the disease progressed, her mind regressed back to memories of her life and mostly after her years in Germany. The mind's defense mechanism, the walls of water that used to protect her mind, were now working and erasing The stories that were located in the darker box – her childhood traumas as a small Jewish girl that carries this increase pressure and alienation. before the disease, she had a huge amount of memories and stories from her six years in Münster. At the time I was a child of a similar age; I became a companion, a listener, a quiet river – able to accommodate her troubled water. These were memories that are very hard to access without a deep dive to the subconscious, and was part of the decision I made to dive into the water tank – a place of deep psychological fear and internal meditation in the same breath. With all that - I think the implicit message of the video is crucial for the work and the key to get from the individual memory to the collective memory – using this emotional memory to get there.

I like to think about time as an elastic element and memory as a fluid one. In 'Time Container' there is also a strong sense of both time and memory, with the visual and voice of my father in one side of the diptych. As a second-generation survivor he had a whole different experience as a child and a different way to handle his emotions. He developed a new way to deal with his fear through his search for survival and place in the ocean. The words and memories that are pouring out of him are a direct result of the familiar place that I had placed him in – that was my active role. It was only once we were on the ship did I notice that my father, who almost never delves into his memories and feelings, was going into his mind to another place. As he went back in time, unaware of the camera or me, I also returned to my role as an observer, listening and watching. At that port, I felt that I had opened one container of memories, one 'black box' out of hundreds. Concealed containers that are traveling around the globe, holding and moving memories that surround us, but are yet to be observed. These memories give us a sense of time, a history.

RC: In your latest work "Moon (Walkers), Mars (Runners), Jupiter (Marching)" three scenes which center on human movement, two videos show a somewhat solitary repetitive movement and one video shows movement in a social context, a movement of exchange between individuals which forms a circle, each runner releases something as to get something in return, as it were, from the group. Can you say a bit more about the title of this work and the meaning of movement in the three scenes?

ES: The new trilogy is based in Japan and is presented from the point of the observer. All the videos were shot during my third visit in Japan, by which point I had become more of a participant than a bystander. I was captured by how different the Land of the Rising Sun was to what I am familiar with. There is a huge difference in the culture, the way of thinking, and even the movement, making it feel almost as a different planet to me and lead to the titles of the work. I became especially interested in scenes from everyday life in Japan, such as, work, school, authority, all of which have a prominent role in Japan's social structure through promoting permanence, accuracy, and rigidity. Movement is a key element in this trilogy, along with gravity – or rather 'social gravity' – and structure that contains the loop. The trilogy revolves around social structure, but each from a different perspective, I could easily return to the Masada analogy in that matter.

The first two videos, the walkers and the marchers, were shot to evoke distance for the viewer from the strong and impressive performance. While the performance appears impressive, accurate and calculated, almost mechanical, the actions are simple, repetitive and 'empty' for the outsider. Structured movements share similar actions (walking vs. marching), but yet with a lot of visual contrast; day and night, smooth round movements and hard army motions, high in the air with no 'gravity' contrasted in front of a heavy-booted army marching down below. One is outside the window, cleaning the view of his own reflection, while the other sweeps the sand. What may look like a meaningless action to the observer, to the participant it contains history, culture, tradition and this social structure DNA. The runner is the intermediate in this trilogy and the most human of the three. Here we have the innocence of children, free spirit within the midst of structure. The exchange is physical – hand-to-hand, just like human nature that passes history and tradition from one generation to the next, and by doing so repeats this loop.