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# Objects in Diaspora

## - by Yael Davids

Performance has always been my way of navigating space and time. Here at Les Labos, it is the first time I've made a show that is not grounded in a notion of interdependence with a performance. The installation is not activated by my performance. This absence of performance was what urged me to develop the symposium, to rethink the artefact – and to probe and plunder the realm of the visual for ways of making thought, of being together, for ways to trace metaphors that are objects and objects that are thoughts.

I begin with –

our tiny house in the kibbutz. A narrow wooden door with a small window on the top of it, separating the kitchen from the toilet.

On a day when this small window was broken, my father lifted my eldest sister up in the air, so that her head poked through the wooden window frame – her face peeking in at my mother who was inside. My mother kept calling at him to stop, but my father, who was amused by the situation, kept on poking my sister's head through the empty window frame. All of a sudden my mother burst her way out of the toilet, her rage immeasurable. Shouting and screaming at my father, she threw a pile of dinner plates one by one on the floor. The plates broke with an ear-splitting crack; the floor was full of tiny shards of glass, and my eldest sister and I were so frightened we began to cry loudly.

An unbridged gap between my father's and mother's temperaments had opened up.

A cut.

A gesture in the space.

A family.

A performance.

A floor.

I have been preoccupied with the idea of proximity and distance for a while now. I keep dwelling on the immeasurable distance hidden within what presents as proximity and the effect of such hidden distances. Think, for example, of the distance between Ramallah and Jerusalem. On the map, a journey of just twenty minutes by car. In reality, though, the distance can be much greater. For a Palestinian citizen you have to take into consideration the many checkpoints one has to pass, the permits one has to apply for, along with the many other obstacles that have to be somehow overcome. Distances of this kind are not geographical distances, as they cannot be measured in kilometres, but rather in energy and emotions, such as effort, stress, anxiety and humiliation, and in substances, such as time, sweat and tears.

Israel has given rise to a situation where even destinations that are not far away are felt to be so. Travelling is experienced as an enclosure. Travelling becomes an instrument of control, a means of destructing and exhausting the Palestinians. Subjecting people to the experience of long distances in bad conditions is often used as a political or military strategy. Death marches are an example of this. Here the destination is at a very long distance, a distance that cannot be covered by the human body, by walking. Israel has created two kinds of roads in the West Bank. One is exclusively for the use of Israeli citizens – the apartheid ways – a sophisticated net of highways that has been built up above the ground, stretching directly from A to B. Below, on the ground – for the use of Palestinians – is a monstrous, complicated net of dusty, unpaved roads where a direct movement from A to B is impossible. In the reading group that is part of this project Farida Gillot recalled our reading of Édouard Glissant<sup>1</sup> when she heard about the two different types of road, the one

being new and clean and high up in the air, while the other is situated deep Glissant when she heard about the two different types of road, the one being new and clean and high up in the air, while the other is situated deep down beneath it on the ground, all tortuous and dusty. It reminded her of Glissant's depiction of the abyss, of the way he gives different colours to the abyss that opened up to native Africans on their passage to America. Heading to a place far from all that was familiar to them, they travelled across a vast and deep ocean in the holds of slave ships, those watery chasms, the abyss. Glissant describes travelling that is experienced as depth rather than distance. The shape of the slave boats with their huge "bellies", those immense containers were unfamiliar to native Africans. Glissant writes "First the time you fell into the belly of the boat . . . The belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into nonworld from which you cry out. The boat is a womb, a womb abyss [...] This boat is pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death<sup>2</sup>."

Another depth of an abyss is the unlimited depth of the sea, the depth that slaves experienced when they were cast into the water, weighting down with balls and chains, in order to lighten the ships when necessary.

Some of the colours Glissant gives the abyss, are:

"dark shadow"

"the swirling red of mounting to the deck"

"the black sun of the horizon, vertigo"

"the green splendour of the sea"

"a pale murmur"

"the violent belly of the ocean depths"

"blue savannahs of memory or imagination"

"the white wind of the abyss<sup>3</sup>"

Some geographical distances become infinite, a chasm or abyss in one's awareness, an understanding of how the political determines one's personal life.

Returning –

The Zionist project claimed the right of return to<sup>4</sup> – the return to the land, the return to the history, the return to the roots, the return to singularity, the return to sovereignty. I think of this movement moving from all different geographical points, directing toward one point – Palestine. An arrow hits a mirror, breaks the surface. Palestine was broken, Palestinian citizens were sent away, scattered in camps. A reverse movement of the Zionism project – while the Zionists returned, and settled in one territory they eventually sent the others away, deporting, exiling, displacing, spreading out.

Chattel – an item that of tangible movable or immovable property not attached to land.

In Hebrew it is "Metaltelim", deriving from the verb "Tiltel" meaning to move or shake. A word that carries a metal sound of shuddering and vibrating.

Object – in Hebrew it is "Chefets", deriving from the verb "Chafatz", meaning to desire or want.

Thing, object – in Hebrew "Etzem" – is the same word as "bone". "Etzem", bone, is an essence, the hard material in the body, the structure that carries. It calls for different terms from the Kabbalah such as matter, form of matter, and abstract form.

Here we encounter the idea that the illuminations, the divine sparks, can appear in the object world in the form of language.

Another aspect of the complexity of the object world I believe has to do the

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biblical commandment “Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image”. I remember the sense of disillusionment I had as a child in wandering through the Jewish section of a museum, or in visiting Jewish museums: all objects, no colourful paintings, no sculptures. Later I learned to appreciate the abstraction of thought and the care and precision given to the decoration of objects. As a child I experienced a similar disappointment with regard to the dim and dull Jewish tradition of leaving stones on graves. I remember the sense of enlightenment I felt when my mother explained to me that the reason one leaves stones on graves, and not flowers, is that stones belong to the inanimate word (*Olam Ha Atzamim*). Stones leave the dead in peace, whereas flowers call them to life.

Different words for object in Hebrew suggest more than an artefact; they suggest movement, desire, essence and illuminations.

The Israeli National Library won a long-running trial of thirty-nine years against the two daughters of Esther Hoffer. The dispute was over several boxes of Franz Kafka's original writings and drafts of his published works. Kafka left his published and unpublished works to Max Brod along with explicit instructions that the work should be destroyed upon Kafka's death.

Brod refused to honour Kafka's request and did indeed publish a few of his works. Brod fled Europe for Palestine in 1939, and though many of the manuscripts in his custody ended up in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, he still held on to a large number of them until his death in 1968. He left the manuscripts to his secretary Esther Hoffer, who appears to have been his mistress. Esther kept and guarded most of the manuscripts until her death, except the manuscript of *The Trial*, which she sold for \$2 million. At that point it became clear that one could make quite a profit with Kafka. Esther Hoffer's daughters, Eva and Ruth, to whom she left the rest of Kafka's writings, put the works up for sale, claiming that the value of the manuscripts should be determined by their weight, quite literally by what they weigh. As one of the lawyers representing Hoffer's estate stated: “If we get an agreement, the material will be offered for sale as a single entity, in one package. It will be sold by weight [...] So there is a kilogram of papers here, the highest bidder will be able to approach and see what is there”<sup>5</sup>.

Thus Kafka turned into a commodity, and his work into a chattel.

In the trial there were two main parties seeking to acquire the work either by claiming the right to it, as the National Library of Israel did, or by offering to buy it as the German Literature Archive in Marbach did. The National Library of Israel argued that Kafka's writings were not a commodity but a “public good” belonging to the Jewish people. Kafka is claimed to be a primarily Jewish writer and his writings are counted among the cultural assets of the Jewish people. What is interesting to emphasise here is the presumption that the State of Israel represents the Jewish people. This claim overlooks the distinction between the Jews who are Zionist and the Jews who are not, such as Jews living in the Diaspora. It marks the Zionist assumption that *Galut* is a state of exile and despondency that should and can only be reversed through a return to Israel. Zionism errs in thinking that exile must be overcome through an appeal to the Law of Return.

The other party is the German Literature Archive in Marbach, which argued that Kafka belongs to the German literary tradition and specifically to the German language. Here it seems as if the Germans were transcending citizenship on the basis of linguistic competence – in other words, by shifting nationalism to the level of language. This argument erases the importance of Kafka's multilingualism to his writings. Some scholars believed that Marbach could have been the proper home for Kafka's writings, since this library already owns the largest collection of his manuscripts in the world. Yet Philip Roth described the German claim for Kafka's writings as “yet another lurid Kafkaesque irony [...] perpetrated on twentieth-century Western culture”, observing not only that Kafka was not German but also that his three sisters perished in Nazi death camps.

Inspired by Judith Butler's text on the trial<sup>6</sup> my main concern here is to observe Kafka's views on Zionism and his general view on reaching and failing to reach a destination through his writing. Analysing Kafka's writings, Butler asks “What would it mean to be freed of the spatio-

temporal conditions of the ‘here’?” Kafka's journeys are into the infinite that will gesture toward another world. “Gesture,” Butler continues:

“is the term that Benjamin and Adorno use to talk about these stilled moments, these utterances that are not quite actions, that freeze or congeal in their thwarted and incomplete condition. [...] A gesture opens up a horizon as a goal, there is no actual departure and there is surely no actual arrival.”

Kafka's work expresses the poetics of the non-arrival. Butler concludes that Kafka's writings open up an infinite distance between the one place and the other – and in so doing constitute a non-Zionistic theological gesture. The fact that Brod was a Zionist seems more valuable than the fact the Kafka himself never went and never really planned to go to Palestine. There is no doubt that Kafka's Jewishness was important, but it definitely does not imply any sustained view on Zionism. For me, Kafka's writing is an affirmation of the fragility of being in a place that is not supported by a territory. In most of Kafka's works, messages do not arrive at their destination; commands are misunderstood and so goals perpetually fail to be reached. Kafka performs in this space between the unfulfilled destiny and the intention of reaching it. Kafka's writings express the spirit of being an exile, also from the linguistic point of view, the idea of entering the language from the outside as Deleuze and Guattari pointed out in their essay “Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature”.

At the end of this thirty-nine-year trial, the National Library of Israel has won.

Kafka now belongs to the State of Israel, Kafka has turned into a belonging.

Kafka writings are conversed about in the monumental correspondence between Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem<sup>7</sup>. This document expresses a bond between two significant Jewish intellectuals. I will take the risk of politicising it by putting it in a vulgarly bare manner: One – Gershom Scholem – had a Zionist soul, he emigrated in 1923 to the British Mandate of Palestine. Scholem was a great scholar of Judaica and Kabbalah and an active figure both at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the National Library of Israel. The other – Walter Benjamin – had the soul of a Jewish refugee, of an exile. Benjamin was a constant refugee from the National Socialist regime, and yet he kept delaying a trip to Palestine. The beauty of this correspondence is the experience of an intellectual discourse that develops into love and affection in the darker times in their shared history. Their great love of books and books as such make a bridge between these two very different men and their existential states, thus overcoming the geographic distance between them, a distance constantly shifting and changing according to Benjamin's next escape route. Here books and thoughts turn into experiences, an experience of affection and compassion, a bridge-making. The intellectual passion and desire of both “meet” when they exchange thoughts on Kafka's writings. I found this point the most touching. As Benjamin wrote: “No other writer has obeyed the commandment ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image’ so faithfully.” It seems that Kafka's writing has such an open contour, escaping a fixed form, which allows different perceptions to come together on the ground of his thought, his writing. Benjamin derived strength from Kafka's writings in both an acute historical and personal sense. Benjamin found his asylum in Kafka.

Kafka turned into a home, into a land that bears no territory, a land that is a horizon.

Another large section of the letter revolves around Benjamin's library and his attempts to rescue it. Indeed, one of the torturous aspects of his escape was having to leave behind his precious books. Benjamin was an avid reader and collector of books who caringly and pedantically built up a huge personal library, to which he was tremendously attached. Benjamin's wearisome struggle to find his next sheltering place from the Nazis was as

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intense as his wearisome struggle to find a sheltering place for his library. Benjamin succeeded in having a small part of the library sent to Sweden where he himself spent some time, but the biggest part of his library was burned by the Nazis. Some say that he died when his library died.

Gershom Scholem on the other hand was a genuine Zionist, a member of “Brit Shalom”, a group of intellectuals who believed in a peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Jews. Scholem was a librarian at the National Library of Israel and with a group of scholars he dedicated himself to the collection of books for the library. He saw a great importance in forming a place for the Jewish cultural intellectual heritage. Sensing and fearing the annihilation of important Jewish cultural heritage by the Nazi regime he devoted great care to this project. In reading the correspondence one senses Scholem’s devotion to having copies of each of Benjamin’s writings sent to Palestine.

Books and writings cross over distances, are taken from, given to, carried by, cared for by, nourished by, written by, looted by, burned by.

Between May 1948 and February 1949, thirty thousand books, manuscripts, and newspapers were seized from the abandoned Palestinian homes of West Jerusalem while forty thousand books were taken from urban centres such as Jaffa, Haifa and Nazareth. Many of the books were later marked with just two letters – “AP” for abandoned property – and incorporated into Israel’s national collection, where they remain today. This historical incident sheds light on a Palestinian cultural movement consisting of literary cafés, cinemas and theatre, which, in the haze of a bitter war, was lost but never mourned. We learn of the complexity of this story through Gish Amit, who writes:

“The National Library [...] protected the books from the war, the looting and the destruction, and from illegal trade in manuscripts. It also protected the books from the long arm of the army and government institutions”<sup>8</sup>.

However, while in 1950 the books were catalogued according to their owners’ surnames, since the idea was to return the books after the war, in the 1960s the names of the owners were replaced by “AP”. In this period there was a shift in the attitude and the National Library was nationalised as part of the political mood at the time.

Hala Sakakini tells how she was permitted by the librarian of the National Library of Israel to choose only one book to look at. “We chose *The Misers* of Al-Jāhīz, an encyclopaedia from the ninth century. And indeed after a while the librarian came back to us and the book was in his hands. He allowed us to leaf through the book right there and then, but only under his supervision. As though we were dangerous culture thieves he stood there watching and waiting until we gave the book back.”

The book Hala Sakakini looked at belonged to the family of Hala, it was part of the large personal library of Hala’s father Khalil Sakakini. Khalil Sakakini, a prominent Christian-Arab teacher, writer and intellectual, was one of the people from whose homes books were taken. On 30 April 1948, he fled his home in the Katamon neighbourhood in Jerusalem. Eventually, he described his separation from his books in his diary:

“Farewell, my chosen, inestimably dear books. I do not know what your fate has been after we left. Were you plundered? Were you burned? Were you transferred, with precious respect, to a public or private library?”

Susan Buck-Morss says:

“The ‘archive’ of a ‘living methodology’. . . consists of the material remains of life stored – rescued – in libraries, museums,

second-hand stores, flea markets. . . . The fact that only certain material objects survive, even as photographic traces, is part of their ‘truth’ – from a critical-historical point of view, perhaps the most important part”<sup>9</sup>.

My mother on her deathbed asked us, her three daughters, to take out of her drawer a few items, ones that before this day we had failed to value. She told us stories about a few of the goods and, with an emotional voice, the history of a tiny brooch made of silver with a small piece of ivory at its centre, and there, extremely small, in fact scarcely visible, was an image of a person carried by a two-wheeled chariot. My mother’s grandfather made this jewellery. The Yemmens were great silversmiths and Grandpa Zecharia was the silversmith of the Ottoman governor of Palestine, Djemal Pasha.

Later I learned that he died walking to Galilee during the exodus from Jaffa . And as my mother passed the brooch to us, I felt for the first time the unbearable pain of admitting that she would leave us. For the first time I saw my mother admitting that to herself. Passing us the objects meant passing away. Passing the objects meant building a legacy, meant having and carrying a narrative.

A cut.

An unbridged gap.

A gesture in the space.

A family.

A performance.

An object.

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1. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

2. Ibid., 6.

3. Ibid., 1–9.

4. More info in Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Exile, History, and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory: Some Reflections on the Zionist Notion of History and Return”, *Journal of Levantine Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (winter 2013): 37–70.

5. This part is a free quotation from Judith Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?” <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n05/judith-butler/who-owns-kafka>

6. Ibid.

7. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932–1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992)

8. Gish Amit, *Ex-Libris: Chronicles of Theft, Preservation, and Appropriating at the Jewish National Library*, The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2014

9. “Susan Buck-Morss in conversation with Laura Mulvey and Marquard Smith”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 1, no. 3 (December 2002): 325–40