

TRACES OF TRAUMA: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF ORI GERSHT

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Ori Gersht was born in Israel in 1967 and lived there until 1988. He then moved to London, where he studied and began practicing photography. His own story and that of his extended family, who originate from Poland and what is now the Ukraine, are woven through with the serial violence and ethnic conflict of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the fraught history of the state of Israel, which continues to this day.

Throughout his career, the largest part of Gersht's work is associated with journeys he takes to places across the world that have witnessed or are still witnessing conflict. Gersht photographs—and sometimes films—the landscape of these places, carefully selecting his frames so that any references to the identity of location are extremely oblique if not entirely absent. His images are technically sophisticated, pushing the boundaries of the camera and what it can record through such devices as overexposure or movement, which further intensify the abstraction of representation. The titles of photographs and the series they compose are short and oblique, occasionally hinting at their significance, but helping little with how we might begin to look at them or the extent of what might be at stake.

The series *Ghost* from 2004 was made in Israel, in the region of Galilee, which borders the Lebanon in the north and has a large Arab population (Fig. 1). Olive trees are loaded with religious and cultural meanings for all the inhabitants of the region, being the symbol of peace, as well as signifying the bond between the people and the land, and thus the continuity of history.¹ These trees are also entangled in the current Israeli-Palestinian territorial disputes, spreading indiscriminately, as they do, across a physical and symbolic divide.

¹ Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*. London: Harper Collins. 1995. includes perhaps one of the most evocative recent analyses of the deeply-rooted cultural significance of trees.



Fig. 1. *Olive #13*, from *Ghost*, 2004

Gersht's images in this series were taken at high noon and were overexposed, so the trees have a ghost-like quality dissolving and disappearing into the earth and the sky, leaving only traces behind. Gersht writes:

My practice investigates the themes of history's violence, the poignancy of time's indifference to what passes, and the cyclical relation between past, present, and future; the flow of movement and its sudden arrest in both still photographs and film-loop installations. The work has taken on the topical dimensions of these themes elliptically, rather than literally; exploring the visual dialectics of what was but no longer is, of what presents itself to the eyes as arrested and frozen or ever returning presence, but which is finally an eternal absence, something missing-in-action and gone forever.²

Gersht's art is not overtly "about trauma". To use Jill Bennett's expression for the art she discusses in her book *Empathic Vision*, in such work "the trauma is not evinced in the narrative component or in the

² Artist's statement given to the author.

ostensible meaning, but in a certain dynamic internal to the work” (Bennett 2005, 1). The aim of *Empathic Vision* is to argue that

it is possible to conceive of the art of trauma and conflict as something other than the deposit of primary experience, which remains “owned” and unshareable even once it is communicated. (Bennett 2005, 6)

Ori Gersht’s work can be read in those terms, as structuring a dialectics of absence via a further distancing or stylisation through knowing references to the history of art, but which, at the same time, allow for the engendering of affect. Gersht’s images are poised between revelation and concealment, between a “bringing-to-appearance”—the classical role of art as *techne*—and a “making strange”—an attitude associate with Baroque art, which eschews full disclosure as inadequate for the communication of the complexity of its meaning. The Heideggerian “unconcealment”, or *aletheia*,³ the Greek word for truth, in Gersht’s work thus takes place between cognition and affect, operating as an opening of the realm of trauma to the intersubjective that does not challenge the authenticity of the original event but enhances its relevance.

The series *White Noise* (1999-2000) was made on a train journey through Poland—from Krakow to Auschwitz and Belzec. To quote Joanna Lowry, Gersht is not only photographing a place, but also a history (Lowry 2002, 153). The images are taken through the window of a moving train (Fig. 2). We can effectively “see” the passing of time through the marks left by the landscape speeding by—although it is of course, the train that moves—the physical landscape, but also the historical one. These marks seem like the traces of erasure, the blurring of form to the point of unrecognisability. But traces remain and this is the hinge of Gersht’s work and its proposition in terms of historical memory, and how we might engage with it. *Footprints* is one the most representational images in *White Noise*, while simultaneously being nearly invisible, showing an almost perfect white expanse. The barely discernible footprints of the title record the impression of a human’s passing through the snow, soon to be completely erased by further snowfall. The picture was taken at Birkenau.

³ See Heidegger, M. 1975. “The Origin of the Work of Art”. In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by A. Hofstadter, New York: Harper & Row.



Fig. 2. *Untitled #4*, from *White Noise*, 1999-2000

Joanna Lowry suggests that the notion of the footprint “has always been a prime example of the index as a sign caused by the pressure of an event”. “Photography”, she continues, “is characterised by its indexicality as the light from some real event impressing itself upon the film gives a photograph its evidential force”. But, she concludes, this picture, poised on the brink of erasure, also foregrounds the limitations of photography’s ability to represent history (Lowry 2002, 154).

Conceived in relation to the problem of history and the elusive nature of the reality of the past, philosopher Paul Ricœur proposes the notion of the *trace* in order to capture the ambiguity and obliqueness which are essential for the understanding of something predominantly absent, something that has passed, yet also formative of the present and therefore still somehow here. Ricœur writes that the only way to engage with history in the modern world is through the recognition and empowerment of the remainder, or “trace”. In the absence of the eternal presence of the present of traditional cultures, and against a “history” entirely conditioned by the prevailing prospect of the future, the trace is the only medium through

which the reality of the historical past can be rendered. Ricœur understands trace as an analogue, as the dialectic between same and different, between re-enactment and distance. It is only in this “between” that something “past” can make sense:

The past is indeed what is to be *re-enacted* in the mode of the identical. But is so only to the extent that it is also what is *absent* from all our constructions. The analogue, precisely, holds within it the force of re-enactment and of distancing, to the extent that *being as* is both *being* and *non-being*. (Ricœur 1984, 36)



Fig. 3. *The Mountain*, from *Liquidation*, 2005

In 2005 Gersht undertook another journey, to the towns of Kolomiya and Kosov in the Ukraine, wherefrom his wife’s family originates. The personal accounts of Nazi persecution by those family members who survived it inspired Gersht’s body of work there, *Liquidation* and *The Forest*. *Liquidation* echoes the series *White Noise* from five years earlier, as it is also mostly shot from a train. The repetition of this device is significant, as it reflects the repetition of circumstances that have rendered this place also, among so many others, a site of trauma: persecution, ethnic cleansing, a train journey... In this series, however, the landscapes taken

from the train window, blurred from movement, are interspersed with a few shots of remarkable stillness, with a strong painterly feel, of the towns themselves (Fig. 3). These calm, almost picturesque scenes contrast strongly with the frantic abstraction of the train shots and suggest an altogether different temporality. They are at once timeless and of a different era, like monochrome photographs of a snowy rural idyll from the early days of photography. These almost nostalgic scenes appear as if the abjection of their history may be forgotten, but perhaps what is forgotten is the idyll itself, fading from overexposure to the mercilessness of history.

Accompanying the stills of *Liquidation* is the film *The Forest* shot in the woods around the town of Kolomiya. At 13 mins the film consists of a series of slow, almost processional pans across groups of trees. At certain points, individual trees fall, although it is not shown how or why, and the camera seems to capture these almost accidentally, as it proceeds through its slow movement. The hush of the forest is interrupted by the hugely amplified sound of each crash. And the process starts all over again. The metaphor for “felling” which is clearly at work here, as well as the idea of witnessing, are fundamental to the work, but so is the enormously affective experience it offers, through a combination of image and sound.

Returning to Paul Ricœur, the argument for the rehabilitation of analogy—that is, a metaphoric device—in the reading of history flies in the face of established conventions of a science of history based on such positivist principles as objectivity and totality. Ricœur’s proposition points towards a rehabilitation of modes of thinking and being that allow for the poetic, elliptical and experiential to complement the rational, conceptual and complete as essential correctives in the pursuit of the “real” and the “true”. This important philosophical proposition is resonant with Jill Bennett’s more specific argument about art and its ability to engage with trauma in a meaningful way. Bennett suggests that such art operates as a junction of the affective and the cognitive, where the affect becomes a better catalyst for thought than any explicit reference or sign, because it gathers up deeper layers of our consciousness linked to feeling and the senses, rather than just the conceptual.

Gersht’s series *Evaders* was shot in the sublime landscape of the Pyrenees, along the Lister Route between France and Spain. The route has a long history of use by refugees of all sorts of persecutions including during WWII and Nazi-occupied France.



Figs 4 & 5. *On Edge* (top) and *Fix in time*, both from *Evaders*, 2009

The philosopher Walter Benjamin famously committed suicide there in September 1940, after making the crossing but finding the borders to Spain closed. As with *Liquidation* and *The Forest*, *Evaders* consists of stills and a film, the latter being a dual projection showing a man walking the Lister Route, on one screen, and his surroundings, on the other. Not a re-enactment of Benjamin's fateful journey, *Evaders* conjures up ideas of flight—from place and time—the futile combating of elements and man's loneliness in the face of nature and history's indifference.

This body of work marks a departure for Gersht in that it focuses on a person. However, it is arguably the landscape that remains the real protagonist. As with all his work, the historic and geographic specificity, which is essential to the work on first encounter, quickly dissolves into something else, something broader and vaguer, more universal and less graspable. Gersht knowingly operates in the tradition of the Romantic landscapes, with the panoramic frames, atmospheric light and mists of German painters and Caspar David Friedrich in particular (Figs 4&5). Although there are obvious tensions with the national and ethnic associations of this work—the Jew trapped in a Germanic landscape—more important is the evocation of the existential philosophy accompanying this tradition of art; placing emphasis on “becoming” rather than being, on incompleteness, ambiguity and the refusal, or rebuttal, of the Enlightenment ideal of the transparency and graspability of the world. Gersht himself has repeatedly stated that he is interested in representing metaphysical space rather than just geographical.⁴

⁴ *Afterglow*, interview with Katherine Stout, p.138



Fig. 6. Still from film *Evaders*, 2009

Behind the temporality of history alluded to in Gerhst’s images, there is another—the temporality of nature, that is, cosmological time. The sublime landscapes of snow, desert or mountains of the Romantic tradition allude to nature as the perhaps indifferent but enduring ground, the expanses of eternity, on which the vicissitudes of history leave faint, transient marks. In this light, drawing from Jill Bennett again, Gersht’s images can be seen to belong to the kind of work that, through its refusal to depict atrocity, shifts its focus away from the traumatic confrontation towards a more enduring experience of traumatic memory and grief. The work is not intent on triggering a reductivist shock response through “trauma signifiers”, but it opens up instead a place transformed by pain. Bennett continues:

Rather than addressing trauma as a physical or inner phenomenon [the work] treats it as having a physical extension in the world. As well as being a temporal phenomenon, traumatic memory is envisaged as folding into space in a way that leaves manifest traces: not simply marks that tell a story of the past, but indications of a lived present, of a mode of inhabiting both place and memory. (Bennett 2005, 70)

Precisely the function of Ricœur’s *trace*, present yet simultaneously of the past.

Ori Gersht says that he always finds himself “drifting towards the poetic” (Stout 2002, 141). Aesthetically his images consistently reference the tradition of western painting and the very idea of the aesthetic as such. This engagement with a history of an altogether different kind—art history—might be seen as compromising, even inimical to, the realm of collective trauma he is addressing through his subject matter. However, I would argue that this overt aestheticisation and attachment to a cultural history is a gesture of intent, acknowledging the essential role that art, understood as fundamentally symbolic representation, has to play on the sociopolitical, ethical and ultimately metaphysical scale. It is also important to bear in mind that the “poetic” is not the same as the

“aesthetic”, although in contemporary discourses the two tend to be conflated. Originating from *poesis*, the poetic is closer to “making”—“a kind of creative making, an elaboration on the real for the purposes of disclosure of meaning via sensual experience (with *aesthesis*, of course, original meaning “sense”).⁵ The “poetic” therefore, that Gersht finds himself attracted to could also be seen as the constitutive element of art. All art is essentially poetry, Heidegger reminds us (Heidegger 1975, 72).

Gerhst’s retreat into the schema of art history situates the works in a cultural tradition and wrests them from the province of the personal and perishable. As various recent theorists of trauma have convincingly argued, the suspicion against the image as an appropriate medium for engaging with trauma is ultimately a limitation of culture’s responsibility to address the violence of history and its repercussions. Whilst trauma as such remains deeply personal and unrepresentable, traumatic historical events can and must be brought into the collective imaginary. Particularly the image as art rather than documentary, “relieved from the singular burden of veracity” (Guerin and Hallas 2007, 9), is in a uniquely privileged position as a transformative phenomenon for simultaneously engendering the critical and the poetic, the cognitive and the affective. It acknowledges the inevitable, necessary distance from the personal immediacy of trauma to allow for culture to bear witness.

Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas write that in the long tradition of western art—with its roots in religious art—the image offers the experience of a personal encounter with something effectively absent, through its “iconic presence”—a term they borrow from Hans Belting, which denotes a presence that maintains within it an essential absent. This experience, rather than considered vicarious or a compromise, is understood to be at its most authentic, precisely because of the elusiveness of its subject (Guerin and Hallas 2007, 10). Thus, continue Guerin and Hallas,

the image’s role in the process of bearing witness can be seen to rely not upon a faith in the image’s ability to provide empirical evidence of the event, but upon a faith in the image’s phenomenological capacity to bring the event into iconic presence and to mediate the intersubjective relations that ground the act of bearing witness. [...] These intersubjective relations generated by the presence of the image open up a space for a witness who did not directly observe or participate in the traumatic historical event. The

⁵ See Gadamer, H.-G. 1986. “The Relevance of the Beautiful.” In *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, translated by N. Walker, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.

form of what otherwise might be thought of as “secondary” or “retrospective” witnessing, becomes in that way primary to the collective cultural memory of traumatic historical events. (Guerin and Hallas 2007, 10)

In this light, the liquid landscapes of Ori Gersht, with their traces disappearing into mists and their specificity dissolving into layers of histories, are perhaps not only talking about erasure and defeat, but also about a tentative overcoming. To talk about healing may be too ambitious a claim, but situating trauma in the ground of culture and art opens it up to the possibility of a communal witnessing, transcending place, time and individual circumstance, and, thus engendering a transformation from personal recollection and suffering to cultural memory and shared responsibility.

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