

# Line 32 a'

Existence under Terror  
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## Existence under Terror

ISRAELI ART REFLECTING CULTURAL TRAUMA

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Jeffrey Alexander claims that a national trauma occurs when a group of people feel that they have experienced an event which marked them deeply. Such an event is so powerful that it may affect their future behaviour (Alexander).

Following Alexander I will use the term 'cultural trauma', which I believe fits situations where national traumas are apparent in all spheres of culture and creation. This term is most appropriate when the vast majority of artists within a community react to a specific event. Not all national traumas will produce cultural ones, and only in rare cases is there an intensity of reaction in the artistic sphere to justify the term. These reactions share a repeated theme, which is probably the result of the particular traces left on those exposed to the same national trauma. In addition to repeated motifs, there is also a variety of styles and techniques, which is characteristic of art produced within a democratic system. Although at first glance cultural trauma may be interpreted as mobilised art, it is actually much more complex, reflecting heterogeneous world views, calling for a comprehension of the various layers of the creative works.

In this essay, I claim that the acts of terror which were part of the Al Aksa Intifada or the Second Intifada, which were experienced by both Israeli and Palestinian societies during 2000–2004, produced a body of creative work which fits the term cultural trauma. There are many precedents for art reacting to terror, and I certainly do not claim that politics and terror force their way into art only in Israel. Nonetheless, the Israeli case is particularly intense and all-embracing and has produced a wide variety of styles which some artists use when dealing with terror.

It is crucial to differentiate between art dealing with anti-state terrorism and art dealing with state terrorism, namely the abuse of power by the state. Although these types of violence and counter-violence are dramatically different from one another, both will be discussed in the essay as reflections of terrorism.

The artistic community existing under terror produced a flood of artworks with terror at its core. After visiting over fifty

studios of leading Israeli artists, I believe that I can claim that the political is general, and terror in particular, is very much evident in all facets of cultural activity. Most of the artists I interviewed responded to acts of terror as a form of testimony and by depicting both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides of the conflict. Not only does the intensity of the art justify the term cultural trauma, it appears that the methods, techniques and materials chosen by the artists hint at a post-traumatic response and even at a post-traumatic therapeutic treatment. Some artists feel a need to go back to all the places where acts of terror have occurred; others try to digest horrifying images taken at the scene.

A fascinating example of a process of creation which seems to have had therapeutic value comes from the studio of Gal Weinstein (born 1970). Weinstein took the images of Saddam Hussein's sons Uadal and Cusal and, through the materials, he chose to work towards, perhaps unconsciously, artistic creation as therapy (Figures 1a and 1b).

When the viewer looks at these images, one immediately feels that something is wrong. When I asked Weinstein how he got hold of the images, he answered that they were the images of Saddam Hussein's two dead sons, released by the American media as part of its war propaganda. Weinstein uses felt, hardly a commonly used material in fine arts, but rather one more usually associated with retirement homes and children's nurseries. His art becomes a form of therapy because of the time and effort needed in order to make it. The effect of the felt becomes even more chilling given the long hours Weinstein had to spend with the images of the dismembered, crushed, distorted figures of the two dead sons of Hussein. Yet the artist does not turn away from honor — he faces it head on.

The practice Merav Sodaey (born 1970) develops, while responding to terror through art, is yet another attempt at art as therapy. Sodaey takes images of buses after they have been blown up and translates them into her own imaginary grotesque fairyland (Figure 2). Her *Line 32a* is based on a press photograph of the 32a bus line after it was blown up in Jerusalem in June 2002. This overly familiar news image of the smoking skeleton of what was once a bus, with its massacred passengers laid out in rows of black plastic bags, turns it into a glittering, shimmering and seductive scene.



Figure 1a. Gal Weinstein, Uadal, felt on paper, 100 x 70 cm, 2004.



Figure 1b. Gal Weinstein, Cusal, felt on paper, 100 x 70 cm, 2004.

passengers laid out in rows of black plastic bags, turns it into a glittering, shimmering and seductive scene. 'There is a chilling contrast between the content and the form, between the subject matter and the decorative aesthetics of the work, which makes it almost unbearable', says curator Tami Katz Freiman (Freiman). The detailed reconstruction of Sodaey, like the Zaka organisation, an ultra-orthodox group which voluntarily handles the remains of victims of terror acts, and which has made itself responsible for cleansing the 'scene' by obsessively collecting all the remains of flesh for burial, translates horror into kitsch. At first glance her artwork looks like a beautiful work of pointillism, and indeed there are visible traces of this technique when she uses felt-tip pens on silk paper. Sodaey gives the impression that she is not only hoping to heal herself through art, but that she is also, like Weinstein, dealing with the trauma head on.

In 'Ahemath' Yuav Horesh (born 1975) revisited, over a period of several years, all the sites where suicide bombings had occurred. Going back to places where these events happened appears to be another kind of post-trauma reflected through art. The images do not provide a straightforward testimony of the horror of these events. Horesh uses clean black and white images that have nothing

to do with the bloody reality of such scenes. The power of these images is directly related to the artists' choice of black and white (Figure 3).

The choice of black and white images may also be connected to the obsessive tendency of Israelis to clean the terror site and resume normalcy immediately after a bombing. This need to quickly cleanse the scene, and overcome death and destruction, is part of a larger phenomenon which has assumed tyrannical dimensions in Israel. The tendency to completely expunge staged is related to the way in which Holocaust survivors were received in Israel; they too were obliged to sweep away their past and forget everything that they had left behind.

### Direct Media Art

In 'Regarding the Torture of Others', Susan Sontag claimed that:

for a long time — at least six decades — photographs have laid down the tracks of how important conflicts are judged and remembered. The western memory museum is now mostly a visual one. Photographs have

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Figure 2. Merv Sotag, Line 324, 2005.

an insuperable power to determine what we recall of events. (Sotag n.p.)

Sotag maintains that the defining association of people everywhere with the Second Gulf War will be connected to photographs of tortured Iraqi prisoners or the capture of Saddam Hussein. I believe that she is right and that these images are now part of our 'western memory museum'.

The harsh reality of life in the Palestinian occupied territories is at the centre of the artwork of Miki Kratzman (born 1955), a committed press photographer. Towards the end of the 1980s David Reeb (born 1952), probably the most active and best known political artist in Israel, became aware of Kratzman's photojournalism. His photos became part of the bank of images Reeb uses in his paintings. Their mutual and fascinating collaboration has been going on ever since and is based on similar world views. It is apparent, for example, in Kratzman's *Om el Phoenix* (Figure 4), 'translated' by Reeb as *Where are the Soldiers?*

Kratzman's image depicts everyday reality in the occupied territories where men are stripped of their clothing so that they can be searched for explosives. The viewer is confronted with a colourful image of a group of teenagers, all standing with

their shirts pulled up and their hands in the air, waiting for the soldiers to come and carry out their meticulous body search.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 3. Yoav Meesh, Call Moment, Jerusalem, February 2003.



Figure 8. Camille Gil, bus, 2002.

between various usages of power, although their abstract form means that a variety of meanings can be drawn from them.

Camille Gil's bus serves as another example of political abstract. Gil (born 1976) participated in the 2003 Venice Biennale where her work was part of the central pavilion. Her interpretation differs sharply from that of Raz (Figure 8). The red and fragmented remains of the bus represent, beyond their immediate context, an abstract way of dealing with open space. When asked about her intentions, the artist referred to Georges Perec's writings and particularly to his *Épaves d'espaces*. As the 'political abstract' illustrates, not all of the artwork produced under the sign of terror need be confined to a particular place or event.

This article is partly based on Dana Arieli-Horowitz's piece, 'Arte e Terror: il caso di Israele' in *Israele Arte e Vita* (Milano: Proedi, 2007, 270-79).

#### Notes

1. Literature on art and terror is just beginning to appear. See Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Graham Coulter-Smith, Maurice Owen, eds. *Art in the Age of Terrorism* (London: Paul Holberton, 2005).
2. The image of the child raising his hands up is reminiscent of the well-known image of the child in the Warsaw Ghetto with his hands raised. Thanks to Israel Peretz for pointing this out to me.
3. In a BBC interview held one year after 9/11, Damien Hirst said that the attacks were 'visually stunning' artworks and that the perpetrators 'needed congratulating'. See Charles P. Freund, 'The Art of Terror' in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 Oct. 2002.
4. Guy Raz gave the title 'political abstract' to a series of his works.
5. Raz has been dealing with barricades since 1992. He started photographing the roadblocks the Israeli army uses during his service as an officer in 1992. The dissonance between being an artist and a soldier was so strong that he was released from further service.

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News editor Doron Solomons is increasingly exposed to raw footage of carnage and violence and the difficulty of mediating this material to the public has become a key professional concern for him. In *Father* (2002) he expresses the existential fears shared by parents on both sides. The father is both Palestinian and Israeli and the voiceover simultaneously speaks Arabic and Hebrew. Like Sotag, he focuses on two Palestinian female suicide bombers (Figure 5) and includes a poignant 'silence' moment as they are about to record the usual clip to be broadcast after the attack. The viewers see them drink and cough during the preparation for the take. This is not the actual shot which will be made public. These moments help the viewer to understand the burden of the moment and the tension involved.

#### Aesthetics and Terror, or Political Abstract

In a conversation recently held with Michal Ullman (born 1959), a leading Israeli artist, Ullman claimed that the interest artists show in terror may be the result of a similarity in world views: radicalism, anarchism and the breaking of conventions are just some of the affinities between artists and terrorists (Buckley



Figure 4. Miki Kratzman, Om el Phoenix, 2002.

14-18). Ullman has studied art movements, such as Futurism and Dadaism, whose members maintained that violence and terror are legitimate tools for artists which must be used if they are to gain influence. These world views originated at the end of the nineteenth century, when thinkers and philosophers such as Bakunin and Le Bon praised terrorism, claiming that



Figure 5. Doron Solomons, Silbs from Father, 2002.



Figure 6. Haim Manor, Coin Mark.

violence had an intrinsic moral value and was a necessary implement to purify the world of degeneration. In his *Art and Fear*, published in 2004, Paul Virilio makes this point clear when he claims that:

Avant-Garde artists. Like many political agitators, propagandists and demagogues, have long understood what terrorism would soon popularize: if you want a place in 'revolutionary history' there is nothing easier than provoking a riot, an assault on propriety, in the guise of art. (Virilio 31)

After the attacks in New York of 11 September 2001, the notion that acts of terror have aesthetic value became popular. Thinkers such as Zizek in his *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* explained the fascination with the collapsing Twin Towers by claiming that terror was aesthetic. The images associated with terror became powerful tools in a postmodern 'memory museum'. Not surprisingly, artists such as Damien Hirst were quick to assert that 9/11 was one of the most aesthetic visions he had ever experienced.<sup>5</sup>

Dealing with terror in art poses a great dilemma. On one hand, there is the danger that, by choosing terror as a topic, art may be reduced to mere agit prop. On the other, and especially in recent years, art with no reference to a social or

political context may easily become irrelevant. Some artists solve this dilemma by taking their motifs from sites where suicide bombings took place but treating these events in an abstract manner. Their work becomes a form of 'political abstract' as it subtly mixes aesthetics and politics. The art is certainly political, taken from a concrete context, yet there is an effort to leave it as abstract and as universal as possible. Such images do not clearly indicate the exact location nor the time of the event so that, although the viewer may recognize a concrete political context, there is always another layer of social or cultural meaning. Reacting to terror through political abstract art is, I believe, a subtle and unique form of creation. The uniqueness is derived from a balanced engagement with a complex political reality, one which reflects a world view that is both escapist and ironic.

The photos of Guy Raz (born 1964) are an example of political abstract art.<sup>6</sup> In his project 'Two Seconds', which is still in process, he relates directly to acts of terror. He is fascinated with time; two seconds is the time it takes the suicide bomber to trigger his explosive belt. Two seconds is also the time that Raz keeps the aperture on his camera open.

Like Hovsh, Raz chooses sites in Israel where acts of terror have occurred. Ironically, the way his buses are literally spread all over the image turns the result into something surrealistically beautiful although it represents terror. It is an image which maintains its aesthetics despite depicting acts of sheer horror. Raz no doubt is trying to deal with the notion of the aesthetics of terror: probably the same aesthetics which Hirst had in mind.

Haim Manor's Coin Mark (Figure 6) presents another layer of political abstract. Looking at this image, we are confronted with a prisoner whose identity is unknown. It could be a political prisoner bearing testimony to life under terror but at the same time it could be the artist himself bearing the mark of Cain, which may hint at physical abuse. Such abuse is also apparent in Manor's Untitled (Birkena Silhouetti) (Figure 7). Both images may be read as testimony to life under the shadow of the Holocaust. Their titles suggest an analogy



Figure 7. Haim Manor, Untitled (Birkena Silhouetti), 2001.