

Art as Simulation: A View From Israel

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Death's Showcase by Ariella Azoulay, MIT Press, 2001, 303 pages

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In **Death's Showcase** the author, Ariella Azoulay, carefully chooses images of horrific events of the past century seen through the eyes of various artists to build a complex understanding of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima are recalled and tied to more recent events such as the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. The sequence of subjects that Azoulay selects lays the groundwork for discussing contemporary Israeli consciousness regarding nationhood and its treatment of the other nation, the Palestinians.

Azoulay's main strength lies in her curatorial prowess in the artists she chooses to discuss. Several Israeli installation artists and photographers probe into history and subjectivity. Azoulay first analyzes Rosee Rosen's exhibition, provocatively titled "Live and Die as Eva Braun." The audience is coerced into playing the role of Hitler's mistress, Eva Braun, vulnerably displayed in her bunker "honeymoon suite". Indeed, this exhibit caused a stir in Israel. The "complicit audience" was at the very heart of the debate, with some thinking it immoral to visit this "event" in such distasteful guise while others thinking of it as a way to redeem the events concerning Hitler's death. Azoulay favors the redemptive interpretation that one could take control of Hitler's death by entering his milieu. She argues that Hitler denied friend and foe the satisfaction of his burial because he did not want anyone to control his legacy and image. He married Eva, he shot her, he killed himself and then had his body incinerated, leaving no trace. Because Rosen recreates Hitler's image through his mistress's child-like gaze the viewer is allowed some control over his death. In other words, there is now "evidence" and room for a burial of sorts.

Another of these artists is Efrat Shively, whose digitally manipulated photographs have a surreal and fictive air. In one photograph the Wailing Wall is surrounded by water, an obvious reference to the fear that the Arabs will "push the Israelis into the sea." At the same time the sea can be interpreted as a sea of tears. Other photographs show building sites of nearly completed settlements that Azoulay interprets as "looking like landing strips for spaceships, like the passage in the (apocalyptic) vision of the messianic age or like the archaeological remains of a past calamity." Azoulay continues:

Shively's photographs ... respect the genre, but to an equal degree they respect reality, and reality (at least in Jerusalem) looks rather like fiction.

However, to recognize the fiction one has to recognize the historical facts. East Jerusalem was occupied by Israel in 1967, together with the West Bank. The previous border between the two sides - known as the green line - became the protagonist of a strange reality. The people (the Israelis) who wish to efface it, to behave as if it doesn't exist, in fact behave as if it does indeed still exist and as if, on one side, live superior citizens (they themselves) and, on the other, a populace deprived of rights. Among the former were those who wanted to efface or retrace this line with their own bodies, as it were. They want to live beyond the line, aspiring to sustain the territorial continuity between its two sides, and are known as "settlers." These people are seen but do not see.

Jerusalem is the site for fictive visions that parallel Israel's psychic fantasy of itself as unified nation. Like a museum Jerusalem is a contradiction of fantasy and reality. Azoulay presents museums as spaces with limitations and contradictory political agendas. They are spaces that strive for unity and purity by cleansing and erasing the past to create a foundation for what they exhibit as truth.

Azoulay's analysis of the internal contradictions of museums is illustrated by Sigalit Landau's piece "Harabait (Temple Mount)" shown at the Israeli Museum in Jerusalem. The installation is made largely from garbage (old and moldy computer mouse pads, of which the museum disapproved) arranged to make a relief map of Jerusalem with the focus being the "Temple Mount". Azoulay reminds us that the Temple Mount was once the city's garbage dump before the Muslims cleaned it (erased) to build the Dome of the Rock. In an accompanying video the artist tracks the Museum's refuse (Jerusalem's trash) to its municipal burial place which crosses the (erased) green line. Ironically the dump is adjacent to El-Azariya, a Palestinian village whose diminished economy due to occupation has forced it to become dependent on Israeli garbage which is scavenged and resold for economic survival.

Azoulay explores artistic renditions through the filter of Walter Benjamin's writings on photography as an aura or a stand-in for the real event. She begins with an exhaustive examination of the gaze and its staged construction. She infers and supports with evidence that shooting a camera may not be different than shooting a gun. The photographer, like the assassin, is in control of the image and the event.

In her chapter "The Flood Lit Arena (of Murder)", Azoulay traces the assassin Yigal Amir's steps side by side with the videographer, Ronny Kempler, who documented Yitzhak Rabin's death. Amir is the yearning settler not ready to give up his fantasy of Jewish biblical land rights. When the video was reviewed Yigal Amir is caught looking and posing into Kempler's camera at various times during the event. Of course when Kempler was filming he was unaware of this. This last point casts an eerie glow on the roles of characters surrounding the assassination and is supported by Kempler's own sense of fatalism and fear as he took the video. Kempler's camera saw more than what Kempler himself saw, as if his role was to be Amir's unwitting agent destined to document the assassination. In retrospect Kempler's camera becomes a subconscious eye.

In her final and arguably most gripping examinations of visual observations, Azoulay interviews four professional photographers on assignments related to war

and occupation. The differing views are the reconnaissance soldier as “eyes of the state”, the Israeli press photographer examining the occupation, the Palestinian press photographer depicting some unexpected images of Palestinian psychological dominance over armed soldiers, and the independent Israeli photographer dramatically capturing the humiliation and torture of Palestinians. Azoulay states, “the camera arrives to illuminate, restrain, monitor, and supervise...” and always to announce its presence. Each photographer interviewed is keenly aware of how his position is present in the scene he is documenting. We visit nose to nose confrontations between Israel and its enemies, whether they be Syrian soldiers in 1973 in the Israeli capture of Mount Hermon, Palestinians finding courage in the first Intifadah, or the more recent arrival of the clumsy Palestinian Authority as Israeli soldiers depart. Of course we know that the story has not yet ended.

The theoretical underpinnings for **Death’s Showcase** are solid though a bit redundant and meandering. Various postmodern strands support Azoulay’s multiple readings of text and imagery. She relies heavily on Walter Benjamin’s view of photography, Michel Foucault’s historical analysis and Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra. Some quibbles are that the small text is cramped and the powerful images deserve more space.

Having read **Death’s Showcase**, one cannot look at the current Intifadah without reflecting on Azoulay’s ambitious project that walks us through the metaphorical landmines of Holocaust trauma to the current subjugation of the Palestinians. Most of these artworks are interpreted in hopeful terms because they shed light into deep chaotic divides. In fact, none of the art pieces is completely on one side of the divide or the other. All of the artists weave enough ambiguity into their work that a variety of interpretations coexist. As a result awkward and probing questions are posed leaving interpretations to the subjectivity of the viewer. Azoulay has an eye for seeking engaging artwork and combining theoretical tools that allow for a fresh re-framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.