

Detours in Time

Guy Königstein

Realising his performative role in remembrance rituals in his country of origin, Königstein departs on a journey through his artistic practice, where he invites his audience to perform futures by means of stretching and condensing time.

I

Two photographs surprise me while thumbing through my childhood album. I completely forgot the first event; I seem to remember the second only in an unvisual way.

I am probably seven years old in the first photograph; a thick black beard decorates my pale face. A white book is squeezed under the right arm of my black jacket. I must be standing on a high stage; the camera's low perspective emphasises my apparent feelings of importance and high-esteem. As is common in my family, it must have been entirely my own idea and wish to dress up as Benjamin Ze'ev Herzl for this *Purim* celebration. While my siblings were happily satisfied with kangaroo or mineworker outfits, I chose the father of Zionism, the visionary of the Jewish State.

Several pages later a second photograph: I am now a young teenager. Here again, black and white elements dominate. And the presence of a stage endures, though no longer a physical one. The small public square in the middle of the village is illuminated by bright light. We stand in a row — master of the ceremony, choir, and other participants — in front of a silent audience, all of us dressed in white. I remember the moment: the annual ceremony in memory of the fallen soldiers of Israel. The sound of sirens and their echoes from the nearby mountains will soon diminish, the flag will be lowered, and it will be my turn to recite the poem. In this case, too, I cannot recall any pressure from my parents. I believe I even volunteered. Nonetheless, I was excited, and neither the fact that I understood very little of the poem, nor that I encountered difficulty in

Guy Königstein (b. 1982) is an Israeli-born artist and designer. He studied at the Design Academy Eindhoven and obtained his Master in Applied Arts from the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam in 2013. Königstein works in diverse media (from installation to performance, from collage to text, from video to sculpture) and exhibited extensively in museums, galleries, festivals and fairs both in Israel and in Europe.

pronouncing its archaic Hebrew vocabulary seemed to interfere with my pride.

Revisiting those biographical sites, I now realize how far back in time my entangled relationship with commemoration and performance can be traced.

II

In another, much later biographical site, I am standing *beneath* the stage. At the “mature” age of twenty-one, I find myself visiting the information centre situated under the field of concrete slabs of the Berlin *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*. Here I stand in the dimmed light, looked at by six symbolic portraits of Jews, reading on the wall the summation of Nazi murderous violence: 5.9 million Jews, 0.2 million Roma and Sinti, so and so many communists, homosexuals... I cannot read further. My eyes go back, translate the digits into words. Five point nine. I repeat to myself: Five point nine.

The sacred *šix* million I so intensively and intimately grew up with, here unprotected by the fortifications and artillery of Israeli commemoration, are under attack. My understanding of history, of truth, collapses, irrevocably.

It will take me some additional years (and significant physical distance) to put the pieces together. To first realize that history, similarly to the artist’s clay, may be continuously shaped, rewritten. To question the extent to which memory and remembrance may be utilized for political means. To acknowledge my participation in rituals that I now regard as promoting selective, exclusive, or even aggressive readings of the past. Thus, to accept that I myself was not only a product, but also an agent, of such a politicization of memory.

And eventually, to devote myself to the clay; committing myself to the construction of symbolic stages, whereupon the *material* character of history may be re-appropriated, shaped, and diverted to alternative causes.

Let us tour some of those attempts together.



III

Protected by the white walls of an art museum, the memorial space you have just entered with your friend might not feel out of place. First, you observe a stage. A blue metal frame holding shiny yellowish floor tiles some forty-five centimetres above the floor. On top stands a horse. No, a leather vaulting horse, but it is properly saddled. Three stairs invite you to climb up the stage and onto the horse. Now, you are sat on the saddle with your feet firmly secured in the stirrups, your hands holding the harness. Though the horse is motionless, you delve into the landscape projected on a big screen ahead of you. This is not just any landscape, but a wide valley, gridded into colourful squared agricultural plots; a light wind blows through the dry bushes on the edge of the frame. Haven't you been here before? The scene seems familiar. It reminds you of your visit to an equestrian memorial of an old Zionist guard in the Galilee. Back then, you were told that the famous settler was killed here while riding his horse, guarding nearby settlements. Was it during a school trip? Or an educational excursion during your army service? Can you recall?

Here, the sculpture is no longer protected by an iron fence. The protagonist atop the horse is missing as well. Thus, the stage is all yours, you are now the protagonist. Your friend takes a photograph, and within one click your image is published and tagged online: "The new settler."

Your interest is caught by a tower in the centre of the room. You climb down from the horse to inspect the ambiguous structure. Is it falling apart, or is it not yet finalized? You notice a bilingual inscription, carved on one of its sides. In your own language, Hebrew, you recognize that the column celebrates the year Israel was founded, 1948. The other language, Arabic, you realize, must be commemorating a different story, and sheds a darker light on the events of that year. The monument is here to share, but the *Other*, whose silenced story remains forbidden, is evidently not present to take part.

A seat next to the wall calls your attention. You sit down in this waiting-room-like corner, between other seats and green houseplants. A cheap, fake, brass plaque informs you that the door leads to the principal's office. But it is closed. What are you waiting for?

Let me tell you: outside, beyond the white cube, there is a war going on. A real one. With rockets and bombs, soldiers and tanks. People are killing each other. The death-tolls are published daily in big red letters on the front-page of every newspaper. Never a final, definite number, as on the wall in Berlin though. Here, on the wall, a mechanical device allows you to adapt the number of the dead. "In their memory" it reads, and one by one you add to *their* sum with each turn of the handle. You notice that real physical work is required to "make a difference." And your friend? Having observed you all the while, suddenly, she now stands up irritated, pushes you away, and begins to turn the handle

backwards, in an effort to halt and reverse the number. For her child's sake, she explains her performance.

IV

It takes three hours by bus to travel from Tel-Aviv to my home village. Here I grew up some two hundred metres from a tiny well, and the adjacent hill of silent, colourfully glazed potsherds.

The local community centre is booked for the weekend; the cameras and audio recorders are ready, batteries charged. As my invited friends arrive, we gather, and I brief them shortly on the ceremony that we due to organize.

They followed my invitation but are now left confused. Uncertainty, even helplessness, will characterize the next forty-eight hours.

V: You say there is a *right of return* but you don't say how, this is why we are confused.

H: If they return, what about us? What happens to us?

N: Is everything ready? Do we hand out keys at the ceremony?

S: Can it happen in reality? The *right of return* will be declared, and they will come back? I don't see it happening. And we won't evacuate, willingly or unwillingly.

H: Inviting them to return is one hell of an issue.

M: I don't think this matter is on the table.

H: It is very hard for me when I think of the destruction of culture that we have caused, as a society, as a nation. But am I prepared for the moment I'm required to pack my things and leave from here? Where would I go?

D: The *return* may only amount to financial compensation; beyond that, we don't really know.

H: Or as an alternative, are we forcing them to live with us? And will we be able to live with them?

Heavy silence leaves yet another question unanswered; it will take us some time to re-approach the challenge.

S: Let's just assume for a moment that we are organizing a proper ceremony; I imagined flags, plastic chairs, juice, as we stand inside, waiting for the returnees to come in.

N: They come in. Applause. Followed by a speech.

S: Exactly. The question is, who says what? What do we do when the first returnee enters?

M: My idea of the ceremony was an attempt at an authentic encounter; for reconciliation, for making amends.

S: Okay, so a hundred will show up at the ceremony?

N: Maybe five hundred will jump on the bandwagon?

V: No! More are expected.

R: I don't think they will come if there will indeed be a ceremony.

D: They won't come if there is a ceremony?

B: You think no one will come?

R: I feel that balloons, decorations, and lemonade, would be like an act of violence toward the returnees. It is aggressive and lacks consideration.

M: My very existence and presence here is problematic in relation to the *return*.

R: It should be something that somehow breaks this one-sided, brutal pattern.

M: The only way to repair the terrible injustice Zionism did is self-negation.

"Have we arrived at a dead end?" I wonder. But my friends' commitment proves otherwise.

S: Every single idea that comes to my mind, I say: They won't like it.

N: Maybe we should evacuate some place, empty something. Expand something, open something.

H: Do you really think that they want to live in your house?

R: The master of the ceremony will say: We have solved the refugees' problem.

N: And then they enter one at a time, and for every one that enters, one of us would rise and leave.

H: Why do we turn the *return* of the Palestinians into a work of art here?

- B: Because we have no choice.
- H: I am firmly against these imaginary actions.
- D: Why imaginary? Is that to say it is all made up?
- H: Because, how do we know what is going to happen?
- R: We are not drafting the meaning of the *return*. It already exists. We are not changing the content of this concept.
- H: We can't declare it as something unattainable.
- R: Not every right that someone has is always, eventually, realized. But that should not deny its acknowledgment.
- H: What you are suggesting is an oxymoron.
- R: Why?
- B: Because it's not like the Messiah.
- R: But it is!
- D: What you actually suggest is acknowledging the *return* as a spiritual concept.
- R: Yes, indeed.
- D: You say that instead of recognizing the suffering and the Nakba, you acknowledge the *right of return* as a psychological concept even.
- R: So that it will be part of their identity.
- N: That's a bit tricky. How do you define acknowledgment? I mean, can you imagine a civics teacher telling her students: "In principle, they have a right to this land, they have the *right to return*, but don't worry, it won't happen. So go on with your life."

The sun withdraws and reappears, but a conclusion seems as far away as the moon.

- D: *Return* is one step. *Nakba* is another. *Occupation* is the basis. If people acknowledge the occupation, to me that's huge!
- B: I simplified it because I have a hard time with the concept of *return*. For me, it is a situation in which there is someone else, and there is a huge clash between us. And I ask myself: How can I try to express it? I don't know; it might be a way of evading acknowledgment.
- S: You mean, if we take it to a universal level?

B: To better understand what it means to welcome another nation into yours. Because I am not sure what it really means to acknowledge the *Nakba*.

M: One of the ills of the liberal world is that it is satisfied with words alone. Acknowledgment ought to mean action, in order to genuinely acknowledge injustice caused to others. Acknowledgment must be a political expression, even if it is merely symbolic.

N: In my opinion, the ability to peel back all the layers of the conflict in this way, with its complexities and history, is very powerful.

D: I would like to connect us back to reality for a moment. We are talking about acknowledging the *right of return* at a time when Palestinians are being murdered in Gaza. While missiles are being fired, and soldiers are being killed. Can we imagine holding this discussion with our parents?

B: Wow, it would be really tough with my father.

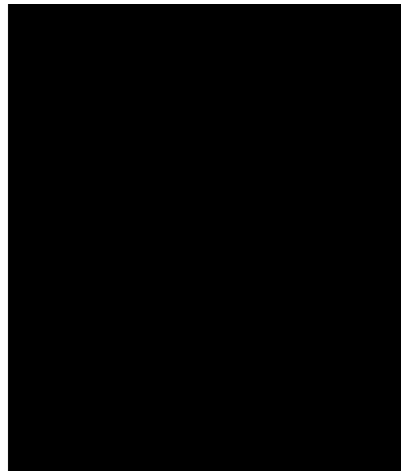
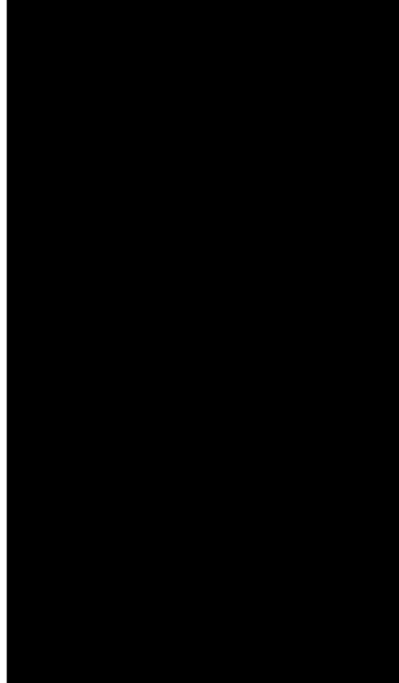
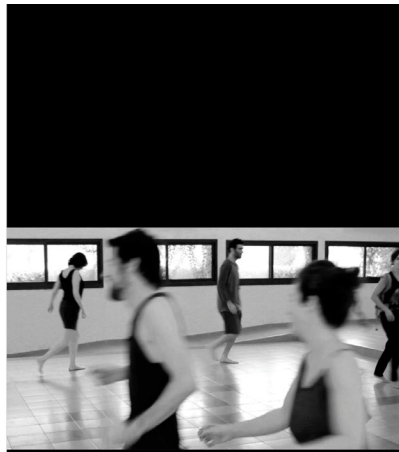
D: That's what I am saying. Do we want to be delusional? Or do we really want to create a significant discourse?

N: I feel a need to prepare for something. I mean, there is a kind of lethargy that should be shaken up with a very artificial act even. I feel a need for ...

B: For a ceremony!

N: No, not a ceremony but a way out of this situation.

The stage is set, rows of plastic chairs fill the big space, the camera blinks in red. A silent gaze is performed, the absence emphasized, the impotency celebrated. "Welcome back" says nothing or no-one but the film's title, leaving you speechless in front of the dark screen.



V

The “Legend” tells the story of a successful revolt. Oppressed by the Greek Seleucid Empire, and, eventually, completely losing the freedom to practice its religious rituals, the Jewish population in Judea began its struggle. The series of battles, led by the Maccabees in several spots around Jerusalem, was characterized by uneven power dynamics, ending with the surprising defeat of the Seleucid army and the establishment of the last Jewish autonomy in pre-modern times. *Chanukah*, the Festival of Lights, was instituted to commemorate the rededication of the second Jewish Temple that took place upon the successful revolt. Nevertheless, some two thousand years later, it was rather the heroic narrative of “the few against the many” that the young Jewish state chose to emphasize in the *Chanukah* celebration. Linking back to its recent war of independence against the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab countries, the religious ritual became militarized and nationalized.

An alternative ritual, proposed through a series of cookie cutters, now wishes to engage you in an updated version of the traditional celebration. Shaped according to the different borderlines of Jewish presence in the Middle East, starting with the Promised Land as described in the Old Testament, following the border dynamics through the ancient kingdoms, exile and re-settlement periods, all the way to the modern wars and territory conflicts of the recent century, the cookie cutters are used to produce the famous *Chanukah* doughnuts.

No longer round and neutral, the pieces of dough are pre-cut into geographical shapes. However, they might deform when deep-fried in the hot oil; declaring new borders, and new possible states. The doughnuts, filled traditionally with red jam, politicize the commemorative event, and charge it emotionally, as they re-introduce the historical context, while questioning the present state of affairs.

Try, have a bite, don’t tell me you don’t eat occupied territories! Delicious? Cleaning your face and hands from the dripping red jam, you may realize: What a bloody business.



VI

Why don't you now try it yourself?

Detour to a far future, from where you can observe a past that has not yet taken place. Is it a *past* that reoccurred? A forgotten *present*? A desired or feared *future*?

The sheet of paper in front of you is blank. You find the stencil and lay it on your white stage, framing an imagined centennial anniversary. It is up to you to define the course of events to be memorized. You may choose to commemorate the disappearance of the island on which you grew up, "now" gone under water due to global warming. You may celebrate the end of gender-based violence, honour the construction of the Third Temple, mark the *point-of-no-return*, or mourn the blackening of the sun.

We discuss your choice of narrative, the elements that will construct it graphically and symbolically, the layout, the shapes, the colours.

Your costume of rubber gloves, apron and spray-paint-mask frame your performance, your hand gestures are, at first, hesitant; slowly they become more confident and controlled. You then clear the objects from the paper, and their negative image appears in colour. However, you soon realize that it is not at all satisfactory.

It will require additional layers, more shades and textures to manifest the mixed feelings, to deepen and complicate the story, to fill the void stretching between past and future, to establish your position within it, and eventually, to enable alternative readings.

You disposition, re-adjust, negotiate, and spray over.

Possibly over and over again.





Appendix: Artist's Statement

Diving in and out of familiar and unfamiliar cultural archives, Königstein cannot resist the temptation (and political potential) of intervention. He enjoys the privilege to shift between fact and fiction, between soft and hard media, between the stage and the plinth, between speech and silence, between the online and the offline, between mischief and boredom, between provocation and collaboration, between his image and himself.

Written or built, photographed or cooked, printed or casted, installed or performed, recorded or collaged, his works examine both his ability as an artist, and the capacity of the spectator, to participate in alternative historical, social, institutional or national narration.



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