

ON YAEL TOREN'S WORKS

In his 1983 book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Vilém Flusser argues that the ubiquitous technical images surrounding us are magically restructuring our “reality”, turning it into a “global image scenario”. He observes that this is essentially a question of “amnesia”, as human beings forget that they were the ones to create the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. But since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images, a situation in which imagination has turned into hallucination.¹ In this “magic of the second order,” as he calls it, Flusser recognizes an abstract deception, because “the function of technical images is to liberate their receivers by magic from the necessity of thinking conceptually.”² Arguing that apparatuses were invented to simulate specific thought processes, he concludes that scientific discourse, since Descartes at least, has tended towards re-encoding thought into numbers. The resulting mechanization of thought is bound to make human beings less and less competent in thinking, compelling them to increasingly rely on apparatuses.³ Forty years later, Flusser’s prediction has indeed come true: artificial intelligence, the ChatGPT application released in November 2022, has been listed as a co-author of several scientific papers in the field of biomedicine. This co-authorship has triggered a controversy within the academic community. The basic argument of those who deny artificial intelligence the right to authorship is that it cannot bear legal responsibility for the published content, and that a tool, which artificial intelligence is by definition, cannot have the status of an author.⁴

Using another artificial intelligence programme, the Midjourney, likewise in use since 2022, Yael Toren has raised questions about the relationship between authorship and identity using a literary text that explicitly problematized the notion of authorship a hundred years ago. The text she chose is Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which was written in 1921 and confounded audiences at the time. The reason for this discomfort was in the performativity of the dramatic text, which explicitly showed the uncontrollable course of performance of a play within the play and destabilized the very concept of identity. The concept of identity is inseparable from the process of identification, which,

¹ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Matthews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 10.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.

⁴ Chris Stokel-Walker, “ChatGPT listed as an author on research papers: many scientists disapprove,” <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-00107-z> (last accessed on February 8, 2023).

according to Freud, is the key action on which the human subject is based. However, the meaning of the term also refers to identification procedures that do not necessarily involve a human subject. Thus, in considering the process of identification as inseparable from the concept of identity, it is necessary to include the relationship between human and non-human, as well as living and non-living, and consequently decide on the parameters that define something as a living or non-living substance. After all, the lecture in which Michel Foucault elaborated on the author's function in 1969 was titled *What is an Author?* and not *Who is an author?*. Foucault saw the author's function, among other things, in the ability of a work to generate new kinds of discourse, which may not be necessarily related to the person of an author. He says: "In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears."⁵ Undoubtedly, both Pirandello's text and recent software applications have created such spaces. Abysmal spaces.

From Toren's typed version of Pirandello's text, the computer application generated images of humanoids whose appearance calls to mind certain avant-garde art phenomena from the first decades of the 20th century, which was also the time when the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* appeared on the literary and theatrical scene. Here I am specifically referring to the works of Giorgio de Chirico, the initiator of Italian metaphysical painting, and to certain figurations of Kazimir Malevich contextualized in the historiography of modern art as Cubo-Futurism. However, the characters that appear in the work titled *Artificial Intelligence, Pirandello, Six Characters in Search of an Author* are also associated with the way of presenting contemporary designer clothing, with the difference that the place of the model's face is empty. Is it the disappearance that Foucault writes about or some sort of ghostly presence active in cyberspace? Let me recall that the works of de Chirico and Malevich I am referring to were created during and shortly after World War I. At the same time, based on the experience of working with people traumatized by that unprecedented massacre, Sigmund Freud published two crucial studies in which he elaborated the term *unheimlich*, which can be translated as "uncanny", and the death drive, which he also called the aggression drive and the destruction drive.⁶

⁵ Cf. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in: idem, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 206.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003); idem, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Stachey (New York – London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961).

In the late 1970s, while studying the growing involvement of human life in the mechanisms and calculations of power from the mid-18th century onwards, Foucault articulated the notion of biopolitics. His lectures at the Collège de France aimed to consider the meaning of population as the foundation of biopolitics. Foucault understood biopolitics in the context of liberal governance and liberal economy, as their immediate effect. He analysed liberalism not as a theory or ideology, but as a practice, a principle, and a method of exercising power, rationalization that followed the internal rule of maximum economy. According to Foucault, with the emergence of political economy and the introduction of the restrictive principle into the practice of government, an important change had taken place, since the *population* to be governed was now viewed as the subject of law on which political sovereignty was exercised, and that was precisely the starting point of the organizational line of biopolitics.⁷

The beginning of the 21st century saw the introduction of the term “necropolitics” by Achille Mbembe. He argued that the discourse derived from Foucault’s reflections on biopolitics and biopower was inadequate in describing the methods used by today’s politics, which under the guise of war, resistance, or fight against terrorism, proclaim killing the enemy as their primary and absolute goal. Mbembe introduced the concepts of necropolitics and necropower into political theory to differentiate between early modern colonial practices and today’s, late modern ones, whose goal is no longer just to conquer territory and exploit natural resources with the use of enslaved labour. Instead, “weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*.”⁸

These death-worlds, which Mbembe understands as an effect of necropolitics and necropower in the current algorithmic capitalism, where algorithmic governmentality is at work, are a constant referent in the works that Yael Toren made over the past decade. In her artistic research, she regularly operationalizes what Flusser has called technical images, whether they be 3D animations, 3D prints of sculptural objects, digital photographs, or visualizations generated by artificial intelligence programmes. However, these images in her works are not in the function of “liberating their receivers by magic

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Sennelart, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁸ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, in: idem, *Necropolitics* (Durham – London: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 92.

from the necessity of thinking conceptually.” They do exactly the opposite, since Yael Toren almost always places them in relation to hand-made objects of outspoken matericity. In her work, the technical image exists as a catalyst for the dialectical image that Walter Benjamin defined as “an occurrence of ball lightning that runs across the whole horizon of the past.” For Benjamin, “articulating the past historically means recognizing those elements of the past which come together in the constellation of a single moment. Historical knowledge is possible only within the historical moment. But knowledge *within* the historical moment is always knowledge *of* a moment. In drawing itself together in the moment – in the dialectical image – the past becomes part of humanity’s involuntary memory.”⁹

The knowledge of a *moment* in Yael Toren’s artistic research is evidently the knowledge of the present moment, marked by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the terrifying extent of war destruction, and the resulting so-called migrant crises, in which exiles and refugees are exposed to extreme dehumanization. This is the moment in which capital, concentrated around neuroscience, information technologies, biogenetic codes, and algorithms, redefines the very concept of the human. That is why Toren’s works approach this concept by articulating interspatiality and multiple temporalities, drawing transversals that place the present in relation to the past, and the human to the non-human. The effect of these works is often manifested through the dynamics of the digital and that which defies the binary code.

Perhaps this is most evident in her work *Sacrum*, whose referential field also includes the notion of deep, geological time. In Latin, *os sacrum* is the term for the large triangular bone at the base of the spine, formed by the coalescence of five lower vertebrae during the development of an adult human. The upper part of the sacrum, which defines the back wall of the pelvis, continues with the lumbar vertebrae, while the lower part is connected to the coccyx or tailbone, whose existence testifies to the common origin of human and animal species. In the work of Yael Toren, the sacrum is represented in several variants, made of clay in “natural size” and of onyx in a much larger format. The clay models, which are actually 3D prints, are furrowed with lines reminiscent of isohypses, imaginary curves used in cartography to mark places of equal altitude, as well as of annual growth rings, natural furrows that reveal the age of trees. However, curves similar to those inscribed in the clay

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’,” in: idem, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA – London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 403.

depiction of fragments of human anatomy are also used in UV mapping for texturing in the process of computer 3D modelling. Their appearance in Toren's works introduces a moment of uncertainty that destabilizes the boundary between the virtual and the corporeal. Furthermore, the artist places the objects that, by representing the sacral bone, metonymically signify the concept of humanity, in relation with a photographic image of the rocky Qumran landscape that stretches northwest from the Dead Sea, because the similarity in their configuration and texture is striking. This juxtaposition is semantically analogous to the scene from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* in which a bone that one of the primates hurls into the air turns into a spaceship. The film scene I am referring to is colloquially known as "The Dawn of Man" and represents the birth of violence. At first, violence is committed against another species, and soon afterwards against one's own.

Yael Toren's works cryptograph a kind of archaeology of violence, so it is no coincidence that she establishes a visual analogy between the human sacrum, whose inner side is "inscribed" with two parallel series of hollows, and the Qumran Mountains, from whose caves one of the most important archaeological findings originates. We are talking about the Qumran writings, also called the Dead Sea Scrolls, thousands of fragments of texts written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek on parchment, papyrus, and even a copper plate, stored in clay vessels in those caves for centuries. Before the archaeologists, three Bedouin shepherds came across them in 1947. The Qumran writings were created in the period from the 3rd century BC to the 1st century CE and contain parts of the Hebrew Bible, commentaries on biblical texts, works of Jewish apocryphal and pseudo-epigraphic literature, and legal provisions of the Qumran community. This precious archaeological site is located on the West Bank of the Jordan River, which has been the scene of continuous armed conflicts since 1948.

In attempt to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks, the State of Israel has built a concrete Wall of Separation, hundreds of kilometres long, in the West Bank region. Albeit it aims to

separate Palestinian territories from Jewish populated areas, it often separates Palestinians of their arable land, or even schools. That wall is undoubtedly included in the referential field of the work that Yael Toren has titled *Deadlines / Concrete / Human Wall*, describing it as a "wall-armor, a human shield of large dimensions made of scales." The grey oval "scales" of which it is composed connote a stylized depiction of a human face. They consist of handmade paper containing a mixture of wood fibres and cement. In

exhibitions, this fragile and unstable wall, made of humanoid multitude, is mounted on the solid wall of the gallery, and its monochrome texture, in which many different tones are inscribed, evokes various types of associations. The artist points out that she has shaped each scale as an empty, expressionless face, with a single slit that marks the mouth, “distorted by the need to speak the truth.” “This blank face may belong to a sovereign,” she writes, “or to a sovereignty, perhaps even to a construction worker for whom concrete has become an inseparable part of his identity.” The title *Deadlines* is equally ambiguous. In English, this compound word indicates the final date for completing a task, but literally it is the line of death. The moment in which a living being may become an inanimate thing.

The motif of an empty face shaped from hand-made paper also appears in the artwork titled *Deadlines / Dust man*. Those completely white surfaces, with lateral incisions connoting the eyes and a place marked for the mouth, should by no means be read as masks, because their materiality is literally memory that inscribes historical time into painful expressionlessness. The artist refers to them as an archive of silent witnesses, entities that exist on the borderline between the living and the non-living. She made them from scrap metal shavings that she bought from a factory that makes parts for missiles, ground them into powder, and mixed them with the substance she used to make paper. When held against a light source, the paper shows its specific transparent fragility, the inhomogeneity of a matter in which the scars of invisible wounds become visible. Certainly, with this work Yael Toren articulates the notion of trauma, which is mute by definition. Shoshana Felman has argued that the relationship between history and trauma is mute because historical subjects are deprived of the language to speak about their victimization. Interpreting Benjamin’s theses *On the Concept of History*, she has concluded that history is inhabited by a historical unconscious, related to the double silence: that of the “tradition of the oppressed,” who by definition are deprived of their voices and whose stories (or narrators’ perspectives) are always systematically reduced to silence; and that of the official, victor’s history. Felman writes that, “according to Benjamin, the hidden theoretical centrality of this double silence defines historiography as such. This in general is the way in which history is told, or rather, this is in general the way in which history is silenced.”¹⁰

I would say that Yael Toren’s works precisely explore this historical unconscious, in which trauma exists not only as an individual experience, but above all as a cultural trauma. It is

¹⁰ Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 34.

therefore not surprising that one of the themes articulated by her works is the same one that Walter Benjamin dissected in his seminal essay “Critique of Violence,” published in the same year as the abovementioned play by Pirandello, in 1921. Benjamin focused on the relationship between violence and law, i.e. justice. He wrote: “The critique of violence is the philosophy of its history – the ‘philosophy’ of this history because only the idea of its development makes possible a critical, discriminating, and decisive approach to its temporal data.”¹¹ Temporal data is of exceptional importance in Toren’s works, which include references to Middle Eastern archaeological artefacts. In the work titled *Moral Code*, for example, the artist focuses on the structural misogyny and femicide legalized by the *Code of Hammurabi*, transliterating the text from the Akkadian language into a digital code. As Toren explains, “neither the Akkadian language nor the digital code are comprehensible to the observers, although both have influenced human consciousness by shaping the way in which a specific culture understands women and allows violence against them.”

The artist has also articulated her reflection on the history of violence in her work *Vertebra*, using an archaeological find as its referent: a 15,000 years old vertebra of a middle-aged man with a crescent-shaped microlith stuck in it, typical of the Natufian hunter-gatherer culture. This “forensic” evidence of violent death was found in Israel in the 1930s, during the archaeological excavations in the Kebara Cave at the foot of Mount Carmel. Toren has used handmade white paper soaked in red paint to make a gigantic representation of that human remnant containing the weapon with which the murder was committed. In addition, she made a model of the vertebra out of Murano glass, which resulted in an aestheticized object whose transparent and fragile materiality articulates the idea of vulnerability. Speaking about this work, the artist has pointed out that 15,000 years ago, great physical strength was required to kill someone at close range with a tiny object such as a crescent-shaped microlith, while today, pure violence does not require any physical strength at all. It is enough to press a key thousands of kilometres away from the victim. That is why the location of the microlith within her paper vertebra is marked in the exhibition display with a red laser beam, similar to those used in modern warfare technology.

In the referential field of Toren’s work titled *Avatar*, I recognize the fact that contemporary killing at a distance occurs similarly to a computer video game. An avatar is a kind of alter

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in: idem, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA – London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 251.

ego, like the application mentioned at the beginning of this text, devoid of responsibility for what it does in virtual space. The artist bought a figure labelled as a “realistic male body” from the Internet and subjected it to the UV mapping procedure, thus translating the three-dimensional model into a two-dimensional surface that resembles animal skin, used from the prehistoric times to the present day for various purposes. Then she materialized these stretched surfaces using clay 3D printing for the head, which was hand-grooved with curves similar to those used for texturing in the UV mapping. Such a furrowed face, similar to a ritual mask, marks the temporal transversal from the “dawn of man” to his twilight. The body, made from handmade paper according to a similar principle, was laid into a “shallow grave” on the gallery floor.

The *Avatar*'s face, de-formed by being materialized on the way from cybernetic to physical space, reminds me of Golem, the mythical figure of a man made of clay, created to serve his master. The 8,000 life-size figures of soldiers and horses buried in the 3rd century BC together with Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor to unify China, were likewise made of clay. This *Terracotta Army* is armed with real weapons. Yael Toren has equipped with breath one of these soldiers in her meditative animated film *Dis-tense*. Here, the kneeling figure is not surrounded by thousands of comrades, but is alone in one of the narrow trenches that connote the archaeological excavation of that incredible find, practicing Ki-breathing. Because breath is what distinguishes a living being from dead matter. That breath, which becomes louder and louder in the film, is semantically identical to the title *Dis-tense*, which denotes non-chronological time in which the past, present, and future meet at the same moment in different points of overlapping yet mutually bypassing worlds.

Another male body modelled in clay is featured in Toren's animated film titled *Pietà*. It is nothing like the young, powerful, muscular “realistic male body” purchased from the Internet. In contrast to the Christian iconographic motif of the same name, Toren's *Pietà* shows endless rows of men approaching from all sides, walking at a slow pace and carrying in their arms dead bodies which are identical to themselves. Do they carry their own death? In 1919, shortly after the end of World War I, Abel Ganz directed the anti-war film *J'accuse!* Towards the end of the film, there is a scene showing a battlefield filled with hundreds of dead soldiers. At one point, they rise to return home, among the living, to ask them if their death has served any purpose. This question leads me to the silent mouths “distorted by the need to speak the truth” that inhabit Yael Toren's works.

Zagreb, February 2013

Leonida Kovač

Translated by Marina Schumann