

q- Yael Toren

Israeli artist Yael Toren presents during the Biennale at the Jewish Museum in the Ghetto in Venice two video-art works based on 3D computer animation, *Pieta*, and *Dis-tense/Terracotta*. And two more objects: "Hands Up *Pieta*" and "Chopsticks". Four intertwining works, complex and charged, adopting technology as a platform to evoke ethical issues vis-a-vis the human condition and its fate in the circles of existence of the 21st century. *Pieta* suggests an affinity between technology and religion while *Dis-tense/Terracotta* links technology and archeology reviving lost memories. This arouses a conflict regarding the question of morality emerging from the free use of technology and raises issues about its ethical limits and their reflection in the contemporary cultural and social experience. From her works, the issue of the Otherness of the Other, and particularly the Other's face comes to life.

The face of the Other carries the moral dilemma and the ambivalence emerging from it; "The meeting with the Other takes on the form of violence, hatred and contempt" as appears in the conversation between Philip Nemo and Emmanuel Levinas, with whom he conducts an in-depth dialogue in Levinas's book "Ethics and the Infinity". However, at the same time, the face carries another message; The bare face of the other indicates to us the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" while commanding us to be responsible for the Other. Thus, according to the philosophical method of Emmanuel Levinas, the Other and his Otherness is his central issue.

In Toren's "*Pieta*", a virtual character, an avatar, bears all the attributes of perfection, beauty and a wonderfully sculpted body, a heroic character of a superhero. Now with the wave of an algorithm, it undergoes a transformation by the means of Toren's digital chisel and is wrapped in the texture of earth, carrying the world's suffering and mercy in its arms. The virtual space in which the replicated *Pieta* treads, is also clothed in the texture of earth and is devoid of the specifics of an identifiable place and time, while conveying a sense of universal desert, a spirit of divinity hovering above. Toren creates a complete identity between the characters, by harnessing the same character for both roles, the carrier and the carried, the bearer mirrors the carried. In Toren's doing so, we ultimately witness the concept of the "Other who carries his Otherness", or alternatively, the stranger who carries his foreignness. Foreignness and otherness dwell within him or within us. The replica bears its own replica.

*Pietà* in its very inception of identical duality, a figure carrying itself, folds within itself the idea of a stranger dwelling within us. In this context, it is impossible to remain apathetic in light of this idea, as eloquently articulated by Julia Kristeva in her renowned book, "Strangers to Ourselves": "In a strange way, the stranger resides within us, it is the hidden face of our identity... The stranger begins when the awareness of my own difference

emerges and ends when we all recognize ourselves as strangers who rebel within relationships and communities."

In a virtual space, while adopting the most advanced 3D animation technologies, Toren reproduces the iconic Pieta for an infinite movement of foreigners and immigrants in a desert of virtual existence, dismantling concepts of place, time, body, and origin, while creating a cinematic epic of migration and endless refugees seeking in circles, converging on themselves in a Sisyphean existence.

In Dis-tense/Terracotta 3D digital animation, Toren pays homage to a single warrior, one of thousands of statues found in the archaeological site of the "Terracotta Army" in China, discovered by chance in 1974. The trenches have been uncovered, revealing these legions of Terracotta warriors, stationed as stage extras in an absurd play. Toren empties out the original Terracotta space, leaving a single warrior statue, the famous kneeling archer, possibly in a position to attack, or perhaps kneeling in submission to his master.

Toren breathes life into a 3D antique archer, directing a long and distant perspective stare into the vacuum of a breathing void, of a breathing earth. As the horizon narrows and zooms in with a virtual camera movement, the archer's face is revealed while his eyes are wide open yet blind, his chest rising and falling with the rhythm of his breathing.

The sound of breathing permeates the empty space, bringing forth a memory from a distant past of the laborer or the sculptor whose manpower was exploited to create the sculptures, most probably to please the illusional visions of the first emperor of China, Qin She Huang, (259-221 BC) who sought a perfect replica of his warrior statues to accompany and protect him in the world of the dead. An entire army of terracotta warriors is buried within an architecture of oblivion, just a kilometer from the emperor's tomb.

Toren directs our gaze towards the warrior's face, evoking a discussion on the ethics of the face, a theme we have already encountered in the context of the Pieta, highlighted here and focused on the face of the archer. Breathing life into a terracotta statue resurrects the representative memory of the original warrior from whose dimensions the archer was sculpted. Here with digital means his face is brought to life as we move in dual time tracks, perhaps parallel, perhaps overlapping, the archival time and the digital time.

The virtual camera moves along a kind of prayer route towards an apse, leading our mind's gaze within a religious perspective structure. The gaze is slowly and gradually drawn to the apse with the rhythm of the warrior's breathing until his presence is revealed to us. We encounter the divine, whose face floods the viewer with compassion. Yet there is a moment of vexing disillusionment when the viewer realizes that what he is experiencing is actually a simulacra, a simulation of an imaginary memory in which one is drawn into a dizzying circle, tossed between reality and fiction, between reality and hyper-reality. Toren reconstructs religiosity, time and memory and at the same time tears them down, leading them to an archive of entropy.

In *Dis-tense/Terracotta* the sound of his breaths heralds the warrior's vision and revelation, as lightning precedes thunder, stretching the viewer's anticipation to behold the breathing presence, the soul of the world. At the same time, one internalizes the insight that Toren's works are anchored on the foundations of twofold meanings and the indication of dual meaning, sometimes with a tension of inherent contradiction, intended to echo the claim to morality, to humanity and its destiny, and to the Other and its fate.

I will now free the two video works from the interpretive theme of ethics, from the same alleyway that illuminates human existence and we will listen to the additional voices that Toren has woven into her works, turning our attention and gaze to them.

On the surface of Toren's works, is conveyed a movement of ebbing and flowing, signaling us not to dwell on the charms of an image that will end up crumbling and shattered. Thus, a hinted criticism of the physical perfection of the avatar - who represents a generic superhero character - this perfection whose end is to crumble. Toren chose a virtual figure of avatar and acquired it as an act of defiance, as a critical metaphorical gesture towards the commercialism of the image, towards the commercialism of art and in general towards the possession of an object.

It recalls Marcel Duchamp's subversive artistic practice through the iconic "Fountain" Readymade, and his choice to have it signed R. Mutt, (1917) with the name of the factory that produced it. In so doing, Duchamp hid the identity of the artist who created it behind the scenes, thereby neutralizing the creator's ego. In another way, purchasing a certain color as the artist's signature, Yves Klein purchased a franchise for the blue color identified with him, and so did Anish Kapoor purchase the franchise for the black color attributed to him. Although the use of the avatar is not exclusive to Toren's use in the purchase agreement, the metaphorical act of purchasing an avatar of the generic perfect male body allows Toren to distance herself from a specific and human or categorically identifiable figure and frees her to create any character she wishes and to turn it into her own private mythology. In so doing, she subverts the appropriation strategy that was part of the discourse on original and copy, signifier and signified. An avatar does not signify anything, at most it is in a tautological circle from the moment of its creation as digital grid layouts that are codified into a virtual body. Giving the absence of a sign and his birth as a symbol, the avatar gets lost in a forest of symbols, the same "Forest of Symbols" that Baudelaire points to, and in the contemporary blurring of the boundaries between fiction and truth in a forest of truths that flood our anonymous existence. The choice of avatar as a superhero, is actually a choice of the stereotype of the ideal, desirable and perfect man in which Toren does whatever comes to mind and creates kinds of identities, disrupting the concept of a superhero. A superhero is revealed naked, a naked digital grid from which the avatar was created, born of algorithm, thus shattering the fantasy of the expanses of imagination through which we wander. The proliferation of the Pieta into many pietas brings to mind a ritual of the infamous death marches and processions from history and of course the marches of immigrants and refugees of our time. Likewise, a mother carries her son in her arms with compassion. Likewise, a father carries his son in his arms on a journey of nomads into the unknown, into an unknown land.

We will look at the covering of the body and surface of an avatar. Pieta and the terracotta warrior, both are covered in skin with the texture and the colors of the earth. This alludes to man who goes "from dust to dust." The finitude of the existence of Heidegger's ontological "being" emerges here as a memory and a reminder, memento mori. Toren intertwines technology, man and nature and the myth of the creation of man in the image of God. Technology creates for us the fictitious nature that becomes real and forces its reality on us.

The virtual space is important to Toren and serves her in exploring human relationships such as loneliness, intimacy, anonymity, power, control and exclusion. The exclusion begins with the premise of the hegemonic ideology, with the exclusion of the foreigner and the Other from any ability to influence and to make any authoritative decision. According to Michel Foucault, methods of exclusion are motivated by the desire of the ruling powers to define the discourse of the Other and the stranger as a false discourse, lacking any authority regarding the truth. Those with power tend to present themselves as possessing the truth, but the essence of this tendency to the truth is identified and directed by a desire for power.

Power is articulated within the language along with the definition of legitimate and illegitimate speech. This distinction serves the interest of those in power and allows them to monitor and control the processes of differentiation and the assignment of power depending on interests. Anonymity is summed up in the use of a fictional character of an avatar lacking status and remaining as an amorphous being on which to throw some kind of mask. But after he dons himself with the identity of the Pieta and bears compassion, he walks forward within the spaces of a revealed identity. Anonymity is doomed to become almost a thing of the past in light of the invasion of social networks into our lives. Every time you enter the website or use an application, your anonymity is stripped away by exposure beyond your control.

The digital space is saturated in mechanisms hidden in the depths of geological layers of an algorithm drive and control our anonymity, whether fictitious or authentic. Anonymity may exist on the street in a stream of people's movement, or in an incessant stream of immigrants. But on the net, you are exposed to surveillance on every post, tweet, photo and image. Any vestige of anonymity is taken from you and you become an aggregate of your personal details in a heterotopia of vibrating keyboards overflowing with data. Our digital identity is threatened by hidden elements. The illusion of privacy is torn to shreds and we are all walking bare in the geometric paths of the internet and social networks. Toren evokes a question regarding anonymity in her video works: Are anonymity and savoring a shell of privacy even possible in our age?

From my conversations with Yael Toren, her thoughts on anonymity emerge: "What do I mean when I say anonymity as a human texture? I am talking about a physical-conscious state without a name, without an address, without a future. An unidentified, undefined existential state, in which an individual is forcibly assimilated in a dense human fabric -

physically or mentally - while being forced to give up freedom, freedom of choice, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, those attributes that build and solidify any autonomous existence. Anonymity in my view embodies a concept that extracts a person's affinity with his/her human environment. And ironically, this alienation is perceived as such only in a social context, a negative affinity but still an affinity.

I offer a view of anonymity as an inversion of identity. Individual identity, as a forced renunciation of one's "fingerprint", even though that very fingerprint will be recorded sooner or later. I'm talking about giving up on being allowed to leave one's mark, to say "I was here." In this context, anonymity is perceived by me as a social blindness."

Privacy is sometimes entangled within a shell of loneliness, the loneliness of a terracotta warrior and the loneliness of a bearer of himself, of his Otherness and of his destiny in Pieta. In this way, Toren spreads a fan revealing a view of anonymity and privacy. Interrelated concepts. The Pieta, reproduced in its multiplicity in an endless parade of pietas, greatly magnifies the experience of loneliness. Given the sheer multiplicity of the pietas, the single unit is distinguished and emphasized, and each such unit becomes the symbol of loneliness. Toren harnesses the Pieta as a case study for the issue of loneliness, anonymity and privacy in an age saturated with digital information that disrupts human habits and human gestures. Every action is being guided by an application and an algorithm, an archeology of algorithms.

Toren has created a space of heterotopia in which she directs the movement and freedom of the avatar Pieta, while monitoring his movements, and guiding the avatar from a perspective of control and supervision. The sound of marching on the desert sand echoes an architecture of movement in virtual space. Everything is controlled and monitored by an ethical and critical gazing movement of the camera that wanders outside the scene and neither invades it nor moves within it. Each independent figure is navigated and defined within the boundaries of the surface that surrounds it. The surface of the avatar's body is covered with a texture of earth and clay. From my conversations with Yael Toren her perception regarding the choice of a virtual image is clearly reflected and I quote her words:

"Two basic terms within the world of digital images, one experiential in essence and the other technological, are the bases of my 3D animations. The first term "avatar" refers to the graphic representation of the user or the actor/actress in video games, in virtual reality environments or on any platform associated with role playing on social media.

Avatar could be a brutal warrior in a war game, a seductive heroine, or any imaginable or unimaginable character. Whether adopted by the user or invented by him/her, the choice of Avatar's character, its appearance and its personality reflect a fantasy to the point of becoming addicted to the experience of total identification.

The second term "UV mapping" refers to the technical layout of the parts of the avatar as part of the design process in virtual space. Deconstructing the image into fragments, similar to the work with cut-outs of a garment, is intended to define the way the texture is

laid out that will clothe the surface of the 3D object and give it an individual identity. Human or animal skin texture, plastic or metallic material - everything is possible and legitimate in creating a realistic or fantastic expression.

The very disturbing idea of stretching skin over a surface of a digital image focused me on the psychological complexity and the dark side involved in an identity game. The worship of a false identity, and a user's experience that perfects the potential for destruction and violence in computer games, all of these led me to the idea of creating an avatar image, whether a mythological god or a sliced skin image - a paper work that tries to follow an imagined human topological structure, light years away from a symmetrical and perfect digital world.

As a starting point, I bought online the rights to use a 3D model of an ultimate, beautiful, strong and muscular male figure - a collection of digital units programmed to create a "perfect" 3D object. That stereotypical representation of my fantasy now assumes a presence as a two-dimensional flat object in the real world, in the gallery space. Digital fantasy is converted into material. On the surface of the paper, the digital grid is drawn by hand hinting at the presence of elderly facial features that time has carved with wrinkles.

The digital grid of the 3D model, as if it has aged over many years, is loose like the wrinkles of old age, like the nature of the free drawing on the surface of the paper. Aging avatar - The ironic thought, given the nature of an avatar's life, that an avatar never ages in its real digital life.

Since I completely control my Pieta characters, I thought on a theoretical level to allow them freedom, an autonomous existence and complete independence as a balancing act against my absolute control over them. So I defined each character as borderless in a computer command, that is, I removed the borders and in this way I released them and cleared my conscience. In practice and ironically, when they got closer to each other, they mutually intersected each other, losing their privacy. In the context of this theoretical move, I found it interesting the way in which control over the data of marking territorial boundaries in the digital space, finds a visual expression that so blatantly reflects such a violent and invasive human condition in real life."

This is the end of a quote for Toren's perception that paves a way for us to observe her choice in creating an image without a source that becomes connotative from the moment a skin is stretched upon an avatar, an identified coating that has been signified in the world, made to be signified, negatively signified with digital viscera and the fake coating as an illusion, constructed from sliced segments of digital body parts that are coded into a whole-body unit. In fact, Toren breathes life into a digital image that lacks connotation and denotation, so that the relations of signifier and signified do not exist here and the avatar remains an image without a source. An image without a source finally becomes a mediator between the world and man, although, that world in this case is a virtual space.

The two objects in Toren's exhibition alongside two video works are a conceptual extension of them and a transition from moving image captured by the objects, From the Pieta video to the "Hands Up Pieta" object and from the "Dis-tens/Terracotta" video to "Chinese Chopsticks". The "Hands Up Pieta" object is made of handmade paper crafted by Yael using a three-hundred-year-old traditional paper production technique. After the manual paper production that is shaped into the configuration of a pair of hands, Toren records the digitally constructed avatar's grid in graphite, a grid of an arm and palm, fragments of the avatar's body.

In "Hands Up Pieta", a flat image of an avatar's hands pointing upwards, Toren slices out the hands and extracts the flat image that originally were coded for the 3D dimension in the Pieta video, so that the arms of the hands that bore the dead body are here the hands releasing a prayer to God or raising the hands in submission. The act of manual drawing renders a magical action of the tension between the manual drawing - that carries the vitality of the graphite outlining the image - and the algorithm that outlines the grid and mesh, that encrypts the logic of the 3D dimension. The transformation from the flat to the designed blocky structure forming a hand, "Hands up Pieta" indicates a double meaning in one object, one a prayer and the other a surrender. This transformation is tangential to the thinking of Wilem Flusser in his book "Towards a Philosophy of Photography" on the magical nature of flat images: "The magical nature of images must be taken into account when approaching to decipher them. It is therefore a mistake to look for "frozen events" in images. On the contrary: images elevate events into states of affairs, and translate them into scenes. The magical power of images lies in their flat nature, and their internal dialectic - their unique contradiction - must be examined in the light of this magic."

Inside a light box hang a pair of hands with an aura of light, a religious aura. A flat image radiates and connects the mind to the secret hidden in Pieta. It is a conceptual channel for the infinite duration of the movement of the crowd in a Pieta, that has been flattened into a magical image.

The second object that conveys a social idea and is derived from video Dis-tense/ Terracotta is "Chinese Chopsticks", in which Toren charges two functions into one object. The sustaining object is also the nourishing object. An object that echoes the concept from "hand to mouth." In one object, the two forces of the nourishing force and the labor force that sustains it are intertwined. Two forces depend on each other, but in certain circumstances they are contradictory forces. The transformation of a Chinese Chopstick into a drill generates work and also generates a livelihood.

Exploitation as a concept and as an object of a covert and overt social mechanism is folded and grants significance to the object drill-rod. In her works, Toren takes us on a journey of philosophical depth with the implications of ethics on society, when the experience of the encounter between the aesthetic and the ethical intensifies the mystical within the depth of field of her works.

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