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HARVESTS

On Sigalit Landau's Works

Sigalit Landau has a video, an early work that may function as an iconic sign capable of evoking the most distinctive features of the artist throughout her oeuvre, encompassing all her sometimes similar, sometimes different artworks.

There is a naked woman on the seaside, rotating a hula hoop ring made of barbed wire around her waist. Her head cannot be seen. What you see is a living female torso, of somebody, anybody. Everywoman is hula hooping on the beach. You cannot see the face, the place of emotions. You cannot see the woman's eyes either, there is no way to establish an emotional contact: she does not want to establish an emotional contact. More precisely: she wants the contact, but not a personal one. Like an anonymous medieval monk, covering his face with a hood, because what truly matters is what he preaches, not him. The sight of the naked, headless woman hula hooping with barbed wire is strong enough to provoke the necessity of some kind of connection from the spectator. You must acknowledge that you have been addressed: somebody wants something from you, she wants your attention at all costs, therefore she breaks taboos and provokes you with her nudity and incompleteness. But what does she want? What could she want? There must be some kind of explanation! *The world is your wound – it burns, it flames* – writes Attila József. But the pain is inside, it is invisible. There are only a few wounds on the hips, old and new, some scars. The nails point outwards, so if you move it well, probably it does not hurt so much. In fact, perhaps it may even feel good – why not? Sometimes. For sure, the beginning and the end must be the hardest. She must not stop just like that, while hula hooping, she would certainly get injured. However, if she moves it well, the ring moves beautifully! That must be the point of the whole game, that is what she is working on. Playing or working – that is impossible to decide. But if the player stops, the ring stops too, and the game is over. Sigalit Landau keeps rotating the ring.

Perhaps we are here in order to say – writes Rilke in his Ninth Duino Elegy; *Here is the time for the sayable, here is its homeland. / Speak and bear witness.* Sigalit Landau's works must stem from the same overwhelming passion as that which is pulsing in these lines. In his elegies, Rilke approached the issues of human life from the perspective of death. One of Landau's starting points may be a sort of indefinable, everlasting craving for revolution: that is the source of the rebellious gesture one can still sense in each and every work of hers; however, she is just as fascinated and somehow enchanted by the simultaneously beautiful and terrible

spectacle of being. *Superabundant being / wells up in my heart* – writes Rilke, and that is what I sense in Landau as well: she started from Jerusalem, ran through half Europe in a frantic way, then ran through almost the whole world, she settled for a while in Berlin, London, Paris, she took Gdansk, the Venice Biennale, New York, Tokyo and Moscow, in the meantime she chose Tel Aviv, the most cosmopolitan city of Israel, to be her home, and one could go on and on, listing all the towns and cities of the world that she visited or will visit later. The point is that she is attracted by all directions, she would build bridges towards each and every culture, she is also driven by the *superabundant being* that wells up in one's heart, she also wants to say it, to say all the sayable things, her things, with performances and video installations, show them with her body, with clay, salt, sugar, boots, shoes, watermelon, and most recently with the wild dance of olive trees.

What are her par excellence things? In other words, what do Sigalit Landau's performances and videos tell us about life, about our lives?

On basis of the video installations that I have seen from her, the latest ones of which can be seen at the present exhibition as well, I have come to the conclusion that according to Landau human life is mostly a series of ritualistic acts, and games of both solitary and group kinds. These rituals seem to be as obligatory as voluntary; they are more or less ready-made, but they can also be shaped to some extent. They are also always associated with some degree of aggression and violence that one has to suffer, though suffering is not the goal, Landau would not say that. What she says is more like the apotheosis of active man; she is also obsessed with action, she must do something all the time, she must play all the time, if you will, because doing and playing are the only options, the only defences against suffering, and let me recall Attila József's phrase here again, the world is a scar. Of course what we have here is not just any kind of action or game. These videos also talk about the kinds of relationships humans may have, the various forms of mutual interdependence, about our being locked up together, forced to cooperate. They remind the spectator that being is not a series of solitary rituals, but that of communal ones. This pressure to cooperate results in operational human circles of different sizes, with marked borders, but also compels its members to commit transgressions, that is, to cross those set borders: one must open up towards something else, towards the other and others. Closeness and openness: these are Landau's key metaphors, they describe two opposing but inseparable standpoints that also continuously presuppose each other. Landau wants us to understand that being open is not a luxury but a necessity, that we are all transgressors living among set boundaries, and so we must be if we want to get somewhere. That is why there are all the necessary offences, that is why aggression never ends. That is why we have all these successes that amount to failure, and the failures that amount to success. Landau does not simply want to suffer all these in a passive way: as I understand it, she also aims to evoke and

provoke them to happen. This is what these videos tell me, without any kind of rhetoric, in a way that is simultaneously passionate and impersonal, with the sometimes harmonious, sometimes brutal displacement, turning around and reinterpretation of bodies and objects. This is how open and how closed the world is. This is how you have to play in it. This is how you can. And, if I am not mistaken, she may even say that this is beautiful. Or, at least: beautiful as well.

In a video there are three young men rotating a huge ring. It is a group ritual. They are all together, locked up in a circle, let us call it the circle of existence. They are free to recognize that they are mutually dependent on each other, that they must work together, and in the meantime they must endure the pain and hardship caused by themselves and by the others. In return, they can rotate the ring. Their bodies undulate, just like the rotating ring. The joy of life.

There are three women, on all fours, with their backs to the sea, drawing signs in the coastal sand, which are immediately washed away by the sea waves. The three women see the way the sea erases their work, yet they do not give up. There is no logical explanation for what they are doing. However, not doing anything would not be more logical either.

There is a pair of boots, being overgrown by crystals of salt in the Dead Sea. In winter Landau takes the boots with the crystallized salt all over them to Gdansk, and places them on the ice of the North Sea. Gradually the boots melt the thick ice of the sea and slowly sink. People asked Landau what this was about, but she would not give a straight answer, maybe it is not her responsibility to do so. When she moved with the boots covered with the salt of the Dead Sea to the ice of the North Sea, she crossed borders, not only in a geographical sense. This salt has melted the ice: the thick ice shield could not resist this challenge, the enormous power of this gesture. And, on the other hand, the boots sank in the water of the melted ice. This is what happened. The video documentation has recorded the stages of the event: a memento of ourselves, from the time when we were boots overgrown with salt crystals. This also reminds me of what Landau has said in an interview: "Israel is not so much like a place. It is much more like a stump overgrown with crystals of stories. It is so tiny. It's kind of a non-place." I recall that non-place in Hungarian is *nem-hely* – something that sounds very similar to *menhely*, meaning shelter. So this non place may be a shelter: Like Ithaca for Ulysses.

Watermelons. A green field made of watermelons, a huge, green, circular raft tied together with a rope: animate life is floating on the Dead Sea. The naked body of Sigalit Landau, like a white-hot optical fibre, spun into this enormous, floating green ground, somewhere between centre and periphery. The raft's rope is pulled slowly by an invisible hand, while it is rotating in the opposite direction. Landau's rigidly outstretched arm is pointing in the direction opposite of the rotation, towards some damaged melons, their red insides are like the wounds of

the world. The invisible hand keeps pulling the rope, until the melon-raft falls apart, becomes a green thread, the body is set free of its – forced? voluntary? – captivity, and therefore loses its safe position. (What else could it do?) After a while you cannot see anything, except for the smooth water of the Dead Sea.

People picking melons. A group game, played according to the prescribed ritual. Young men, gathered up in a chain, pick up watermelons hiding in the green, throw them to each other, collect them in a pile, take them away with a tractor. Day time and night time pictures, shot from above and from the side. What is there behind what we see? Peaceful collecting of melons, a praise of collective work, maybe the clearing of a mine field, the painstaking collection of explosives? Or is it all of these?

Olive foliage is shaking in the air. If there ever was piece, and quiet heartbeat, that is gone by now without a trace. If there ever were rules, they do not apply now, there are other rules now, other times. A coarse, brutal power is shaking, tearing the leaves. The vulnerable trees are trembling. There are machines rocking the trunks of the trees, their sound is like the blatter of machine guns. In the meantime, aggressive-looking men with face masks are washing their hands in a casual manner. But there wasn't even a judgment! Later people are hitting the branches with long sticks. On the chest and back of a man, on his vest, you can see the spread wings of a bird, which look like the sunbeams coming across the canopy. Like a cruel, winged god making sure that no trees are left untouched, without being harvested. And the yield is falling, the olives are rolling down like colourful beads. Meanwhile, you can hear women singing sadly, as if mourning. Harvest! The harvest is completed.

Window – this is the title of the video that shows the round glass window of a washing machine. Through the window you can see the inside: wrinkled, faded clothes are rolling, stuck and flung together. The short description of the work by the artist tells you that these are the vests of Palestinian olive harvest workers. For a moment the caption “Bridge” becomes visible on one of them, but the window, the window of opportunities is closed. It looks like there is a storm inside. The drum is rolling – the drum of life – you can hear its monotonous hum. At times the rotation stops, the sound ends, then the whole thing starts all over again. It is as if you could look straight into the ancient eye of the world in the middle of its forehead, and there you could see yourself. What else could you see, after all? The red of a rag in the middle of this sparkling greyness. Then suddenly a few drops appear on the outer edge of the window, at the bottom of the eye. They leak down slowly, then dry up. Thus go the tears of the world. The machine keeps humming, the tank is filled with water again and again, the drum keeps rolling.