The Eye's Memorial

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A hand extends to a gravestone, touches it, places itself like a pebble alongside the other pebbles scattered on it. Hand and pebbles join the gravestone, affirming what it seeks to commemorate: the body laid underneath, the life of this body, in this case the life of Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, author of **The Human Condition**, **Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil**, and **The Origins of Totalitarianism**. Arendt sought in her books to understand the 20th century, its incomprehensible horrors, as well as the new possibilities it offered humanity. It seems that Yair Barak's exhibition, "Moving away from something he stares at," attempts to resume Arendt's project and understand the human condition, though not by a direct depiction. Rather, it seeks, as the exhibition's title suggests, simultaneously to move away and stare; to distance itself in order to move closer.

How, then, does one achieve this indirect depiction of the human condition? Apart from the hand touching the gravestone, Barak's works bear no testimony to a living human figure, yet humans are present in each and every one, by their very absence. A sense of discomfort accompanies the viewing of the photographs: have the humans been annihilated, leaving behind nothing but their void habitat? Has Earth been suddenly deserted? Furthermore, not only are humans absent from the works, the objects presented in them always appear obstructed: shop doors are closed, electronic signs are broken down, ancient trunks are felled, wide roads are empty, and various objects disintegrate from use and are exhibited in solitary muteness.

Barak has compared his photographs with those of Eugène Atget, who photographed the

deserted streets of Paris at the turn of the 20th century. According to Walter Benjamin, whose spirit hovers over the exhibition, Atget's photographs present crime scenes, that is—the gaze of the police photographer who arrives at the scene only after the crime has been committed and the criminal has cleared off. What, then, is the crime exhibited in Barak's works? And who is the criminal?

Barak's photographs are presented like a detective riddle that conceals the secret of our life, the secret of the human condition. Here I offer not a solution to the riddle—for there is none—but rather possible directions for investigating how to touch the secret, to move away from it, to stare at it.

The first direction of investigation is **memory**. Apart from Arendt's gravestone, the exhibition presents an abundance of monuments, sculptures and vestiges of various eras. Barak deviates from the cliché that regards each photograph as a work of memory which leaves traces, for he interferes with each monument, as if trying to say something about the desperate attempt to remember and commemorate. He does not criticize or negate this attempt per se, but shows the way in which the monument is severed from its origin and acquires a new life. Barak's main interest is not memory as such, but rather the way in which it invades the present, which in turn invades it.

This brings us to the second direction of investigation, which is **use**. Monument and memory both denote an obstructed possibility for use, something that has lost its original purpose. In a monument we are meant to commemorate someone or something that had a use in the past, and position it at the center of our use of the present, as a reminder or a mute testimony. The non-use of a monument is a kind of connecting line between the uses of the past and the uses of the present, which promises the continuation of both. But what if the present, too, becomes useless? And if the modern experience, as Benjamin claimed,

has become impoverished and depleted of its original use? In order to examine the link between memory, experience and use, I finally turn to the question of **gaze**. I will try to place the gaze in the role of a frontier between past and present, a translation of what has been into what there is. The gaze stretches the boundaries of time and endows not only the eye's lens but also, especially, the camera lens with a power that simultaneously eliminates and sustains, for it exposes the secret of use through its depletion.

The Erased Memory

A striking work in the exhibition is **The Saddest Piece of Stone** (2012, pp. @@–@@), whose subject is the Lion Monument in Lucerne, Switzerland. The title is a paraphrase of Mark Twain's description of the lion as "the most mournful and moving piece of stone in the world."[i] Barak encompassed the work with bright red and severed the lion from the massive cliff onto which it is hewn, and from the Latin inscription above it, commemorating the loyalty and bravery of the Swiss: *Helvetiorum fidei ac virtuti*.

The Lion Monument was erected in 1821 in memory of the Swiss Guards killed in 1792 at the Tuileries Palace in Paris while protecting Louis XVI from French revolutionaries. The monument was erected, then, only once the conservative powers returned to rule in France and Switzerland, some thirty years after the events it commemorates. In order for the killed soldiers to become a dying lion, not only time was required but also a semblance of returning to the good old regime. True, every monument seeks, by its very definition, to commemorate, to place an event or a person beyond time in order to provide it with presence at any desired time; but we are well aware here that the monument is not identical to what it commemorates, and that in order to exist it must await the appropriate

conditions. The existence of the monument depends above all on the death of its signified, without which there would be no reason to erect it. Yet, from the moment it is erected it acquires a life of its own, which at times intersects with the signified and at times replaces it. The Swiss Guards have long been dead and forgotten, but the lion has survived—sad, so sad, endlessly mourning, alone, the soldiers it is destined to commemorate.

I maintained earlier that Barak is not interested in memory per se, but rather in the way in which it intertwines with the present, requires it, overshadows it while being overshadowed by it. Thus, many of Barak's works are photographed in Berlin and refer to its Nazi past, always, however, within contemporary contexts. The two enigmatically titled photographs **She Was the First to Understand** (2011, pp. @@–@@) depict a tree in Tempelhof Park, which until 2008 served as an airport. Whereas the photograph on the left shows the tree in front of the terminal building, built in the Fascist style of Albert Speer, the photograph on the right is presented from the opposite direction, facing what used to be the runways and is today a vast park. Barak presents two spatial points of view that are also two points in time: from the past (the disused terminal) to the present (the park that replaces the runways) or from the present to the past.

"Moving away from something he stares at" is a paraphrase of Benjamin's famous description of the angel of history ("about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating") whose face is turned toward the past and watches its wreckage, while he himself is propelled irresistibly into the future, unable to stay.[ii] Barak, too, is contemplating the wreckage of the past, the airport where no aircraft has landed for years. However, it is not quite a wreck, for the airfield has become a park and a venue for parties, exhibitions and festivals, in a contemporary Berlin "happy end" of sorts, which appeases and calms the horrifying past of the tale's beginning. The angel of history, accustomed to see ruin and destruction everywhere, rubs his eyes in amazement, unable to locate the bombed Berlin.

He must therefore delay, finally turn his head and understand the bi-directionality of the gaze, of time, of memory: on the one hand the infinite green space, on the other hand the disused terminal, and in the middle the tree, perhaps replacing the angel of history himself. Thus the tree itself becomes a monument that separates past and present/future, a monument which Barak's camera locates but perhaps also erects in the midst of the open park.

Another charged location in Berlin is the Olympic Stadium built by the Nazis for the 1936 Summer Olympics. The series "Olympia" (2011, pp. @@–@@, @@) comprises six works that center on forgotten, derelict areas in the park. It would seem that here the angel of history finds better wreckage to fixedly contemplate: a turned-off electronic board in an environment inducing a sense of neglect; silent, deserted access roads that pass through naked trees; and goalposts piled up in an abandoned court. Only two images diverge, and it is no coincidence that they both deal with monuments. **Olympia #6** (p. @@) shows a monumental sculpture of a man, in the neo-classical style that was widely used at the time in the attempt to appropriate classical culture and link it with the Aryan ideal. However, we see not the sculpture's front but its side, at an angle from which he seems almost crucified, hewn into the heavy stone from which he cannot break away. Thus, as in the dying lion monument, here too the ideal of courage becomes a model of melancholy and mourning.

In **Olympia #3** (p. @@), two brightly black objects are seen, like two sealed monuments which, unlike the slowly sinking site, withstand well the ravages of time and seem to protrude pleasantly toward infinity. However, these monuments also have a life of their own and soon turn out to be no more than box offices. True, they are closed, sealed and locked, but only temporarily so, for they will soon reopen for a forthcoming event. What initially seemed like a monument to commemorate the past is now revealed in its contemporary-but-delayed use. Thus, the boundaries between past and present/future,

between memory and use, are yet again stretched and challenged.

The most salient example for the gap between a monument and the object of its commemoration is the series “The Inner Circle” (2013, pp. @@–@@), which depicts the mysterious stones of Stonehenge, England. Scientists from all over the world have been trying for many years to understand what the stones were used for: is this a ritual site, a memorial for the dead, or is it perhaps a more functional site, perhaps an observatory? The site of Stonehenge has completely severed itself from its original signified, and thus serves as an extreme case of memory that presents both the futility of the wish to commemorate and the overly-great success of commemoration, like a *golem* that turns on its creator, as attested by the crowds of tourists that gather at the site, mystified. It seems that it is the very uncertainty regarding their original use or object that gives the stones their sublime significance. Barak focuses here on the “inner circle” of Stonehenge, implying that he has reached the secret’s essence, the heart of the matter, while concurrently disrupting the stones’ view, presenting them one atop the other, vertical and horizontal stones piled together. It might indeed be that the inner circle does hold the secret, but this circle cannot be broken, only multiplied: prolonging the monument’s life, backwards and forward in time, simultaneously.

The monumental Stonehenge stones are massive, and the stones laid on Hannah Arendt’s gravestone are tiny, yet their message seems identical: whatever you do in the world, however great your actions, you will never escape the human truth that you are dust and unto dust you shall return. Any attempt to surmount this truth through commemoration is bound to fail, any memory will be erased and any existence will disappear. This is the starting point and end point of the human condition, yet with free choice in between. Once we comprehend the futility and insignificance, a new kind of significance might be revealed, which Barak’s works seek to examine. The monument’s independent life and the

confusion of times it creates are at the center of the examination; in order to complete it, Barak turns in another direction: no more an elusive past, but a present that constantly seeks to elude.

Experience and Poverty

The series “The Morning After” (2011, pp. @@–@@) comprises ten works photographed on deserted Zurich streets. The title implies that here, too, the key to understanding the works may be a past event, a wild night from which one wakes up with a hangover, confusion and a mighty sense of emptiness. Indeed, **The Morning After #2** presents an empty pub, with the welcoming-yet-ridiculous sign “Welcome to Paradise.” The other works in the series also induce a sense of closedness and harsh vacuousness: the shops and the shutters are closed, the roads are deserted and the cars are still. The present is depleted of meaning and is sealed; all that remains is to wander the deserted streets and assert the dreariness.

“Poverty of experience. This should not be understood to mean that people are yearning for new experience. No, they long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty—their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty—that it will lead to something respectable.”[iii] Thus Benjamin wrote in 1933. Making a pure and decided use of poverty is one of Barak’s greatest achievements, extracting from it “something respectable.” But what is that “something”?

I presented earlier the human condition as linked in Barak’s oeuvre with an

incomprehensible crime, a crime which, the more we seek to understand its meaning, its inner circle, the more it eludes us. Barak repeatedly thrusts at us the opacity of crime, thus seeking to assert it on the one hand while on the other hand demonstrate that it cannot be located in time and space. The human condition—birth, life, death—is a crime scene, but any attempt to break through the circle will only remove us further away from it. The sought-after "something respectable" is not just the intellectual comprehension of insignificance, but rather its deep experience, an experience of diving into flatness and lingering there.

According to Arendt, action requires faith in eternity whereas we, modern people, have lost that faith, hence the power of our action is gradually extinguished. Barak adopts this insight and suggests a link between the diminution of action and the loss of faith in eternity, by his very dealing with monuments, i.e. with that which is meant to commemorate and eternalize. The deserted streets become a monument, thus attesting to the "crime" that depleted them, a crime that is forever linked with the pretense of beating time.

This pretense is prominent in the many photographs in the exhibition that deal with botanical gardens (Geneva, Chelsea, Kew Gardens), this futile human attempt to classify, organize and exhibit the variety of natural vegetation from around the world. The botanical garden excludes nature from its context—the original space and time where it developed—and submits to the kindness of human rationality, which in turn imbues it with order and logic that are eternal and stronger than any fleeting space and time. However, in Barak's works, order and logic are soon disrupted. The trees are felled, the hothouses depleted, the plants wrapped in plastic bags and the timeless, careful classification turns out to be a relentless labor of filling and depleting.

In one of the works (**Botanical #7**, 2011, pp. @@–@@) a man-made beehive appears in the midst of a thicket, with a stone fence and an elegant building behind. A circular inscription appears on the beehive: "Bees need flowers, flowers need bees"—a seemingly simple inscription which conceals its missing component: why should one mention the interdependency of bees and flowers if it were not reliant, at least in a botanical garden, on human beings? People build botanical gardens for themselves in order to hide, a Garden of Eden where they can elude the eyes of God, having committed the original sin. But this sin consists of the very creation of the garden. One must not create Gardens of Eden, one must not seek to freeze nature and time: one should live in them. One must not aspire to personal eternity or the immortality of wisdom and nature but rather, as Arendt taught us, to the eternity of actions within life itself.

This, perhaps, is the human tragedy: humans, in contrast with "animals" or "nature," cannot "just" live. Humans are consumed by an infinite passion to organize and commemorate, which eventually leads to the impoverishment of experience. Barak is not nostalgic, nor does he call for a return to the lost paradise; rather, he asserts the depletion of the "artificial paradises," evoked in the title of Baudelaire's essay.[iv] Barak enables us to fully experience the passion of commemoration, thus leading us to "something respectable." He shows each structure to be always and firstly a monument, always announcing its own destruction, poverty, impoverishment. The monument does its very best to try and hide the void behind it, but Barak's camera lens exposes it as it is, barring us from any escape.

The Boundaries of the Gaze

Jean-Paul Sartre maintains that **the gaze** is a transit point between two opposing

existences: the state of a subject and the state of an object. When I look at something I regard it as an object, but to realize myself as a subject I still need the external affirmation of another subject. Thus I must be seen by another gaze that will observe me as I observe, an external gaze that will confirm my ability to look at others. However, the subsequent paradox is that this external gaze will immediately see me as an object. This is the vicious circle in which one is held: I want to be a subject, but in order to realize this I must turn myself into an object; according to Sartre, we are always "stuck" in one of these poles, i.e. we find ourselves in the role of the "sadist" or the "voyeur"—who seeks to be solely a subject and turn the others into objects—or in the role of the "masochist" or "exhibitionist" —who seeks to be just an object and receive an affirmation of his or her being from the gaze of the other. However, both these extremes miss the opportunity of being both subject and object, i.e. to look and be looked at simultaneously. According to Sartre, such a mutual gaze is not possible and we can only be aware of the paradox and avoid being fixated in one of these poles, i.e. become accustomed but not addicted to the gaze of the other; become accustomed to the gaze of the world but never forget our dependence on the other.[v]

Unlike Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas developed a whole theory based on the ethical command to look at the other with a gaze that will instill it with the status of a subject, not of an object.[vi] However, if we again turn to Benjamin, we may claim that even if Levinas is right, we, the modern people, have lost the ability to look at the other in such a way. Benjamin situates the question of the gaze within historical circumstances which Sartre and Levinas overlook, and discusses specifically the camera lens that does not return the gaze.[vii] In other words, the lens' gaze at the world is not beneficent and kind as Levinas would have it, but is located in the sadist/voyeur position. For this gaze, the eyes of the other are but another object in the world, rather than a first step toward mutual construction of subjectivity. Furthermore, according to Benjamin, this photographing gaze

is not unique to the camera lens alone, but gradually takes over the world, in an era when the human and camera gazes constantly and indistinguishably intertwine.

What, then, is Barak's stance regarding the gaze? And how is the gaze linked with the question of monument, experience and use? Barak never photographs events (or "actions" in Arendt's terminology), just as he never photographs people. Yet people, and events, are always present in his work. Thus he implies the camera's decisive role in constructing an event and paving pathways toward it. This role means raising the monument, i.e., announcing the absence of an event or a person, but in a way which also opens a new life for them. If that moment in Sartre, when I-am-being-looked-at-while-looking, shifts me from the role of a subject to that of an object, then Barak steps one step further and announces that the gaze, any gaze, fixes its object but this fixation is hidden in everyday life. Therefore, the role of photography is to assert it through hiding the object (person, event, action) which becomes a ghost, a present-absentee in each work in the exhibition.

Unlike art and philosophy which so often seek to return the gaze and encompass the object with an aura, Barak seeks to deplete the aura from his objects; however, he does it so blatantly, that the aura is asserted in its negative form: not only it, but also the object it was meant to encompass disappears. The experience might not be enriched in this way, but its poverty is nonetheless asserted, and that "something respectable" it leads to is, among others, the exposure of the way the gaze fixates its object.

Barak establishes gaze-monuments to the objects he stares at, but these are always disrupted-disrupting monuments, monuments that offer no sweet comfort or promise of eternal redemption. He does not cooperate with the human attempt to achieve immortality, since he follows Hannah Arendt's understanding that man himself is not immortal, only his actions are. However, these actions gradually fade in an era that pursues

eternity and hands over to the eye the task of organization, control, fixation and commemoration. Excluding people, events and actions from the works thus reflects a historical situation while simultaneously saying something about how it might change. Barak eliminates people and actions but also implies their return from this exclusion. Hence the melancholy that permeates the works. It is not, however, the Freudian melancholy of mourning, since for Barak mourning is always linked with growth and vitality. It is therefore mourning a poor experience that finally succeeds in fulfilling itself.

Epilogue: A Full Circle?

An opening at the entrance to the exhibition, on the right, invites visitors to enter a closed space. There, by the dying lion, a two-channel video work is screened: the right-hand channel shows a huge jet of water rising up against the sky, while in the one on the left a massive stream of water pours down onto a lake. At the center of the space, on the floor, lies a marble sculpture, another monument, a three-dimensional one, with the inscription "I'd rather not." It is a paraphrase of the renowned reply given by Herman Melville's Bartleby—the symbol of refusal—who responds to each question and request with the frustrating phrase: "I would prefer not to."[viii]

The black monument, commemorating Bartleby's refusal, corresponds with three other monuments in the exhibition's main space, in the guise of massive color prints of covers of three novels by Thomas Mann, in German. One is **The Magic Mountain**, in which Mann narrates the life of Hans Castorp, who has spent seven years in a tranquil sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland.[ix] Castorp, it seems, does not require a physical cure but rather a different kind of cure, for he deliberates throughout the novel over the question of refusal:

why should one rejoin the people in the "flatlands," who are caught up in a rat race, when one can peacefully and pleasantly live one's life here, atop the Magic Mountain? What do the people of the flatlands seek? This complacent reflection finally comes upon the brutality of history, and when World War I breaks out, Castorp—like Nietzsche's Zarathustra—hurries down the mountain to join the rest of humanity. Yet unlike Zarathustra he does so not in order to warn humans of their futility, but rather to enlist and join that which he regards as the epitome of vitality, that is, fighting in the brutal killing fields.

According to Benjamin, World War I was one of the decisive causes of the poverty of experience: "For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers."[x] The tumult and cheer of joining the battlefield were soon replaced with deep despair and loss of faith not only in the state, economy and leaders, but also in life itself. **The Magic Mountain** was published in 1924, after the German defeat and at the height of Weimar Republic's mad hyperinflation. Mann undoubtedly knew the Great War could not save Castorp from his hesitations and refusal to live. Indeed, the war only confirmed his fears and doubts, and it may be that the novel suggests that these very fears are the cause of war; that when one loses the will to live, the unavoidable result is war. For in political life, as in the life of the soul, there can be no vacuum, and refusal to live is a declaration of war on the powers of life which eventually either turn on you or leave you.

What is the meaning of Mann's monuments in the exhibition? They might denote exactly his insistence to live and create, despite his sorrowful life: World War I (which Mann, like many of his contemporary intellectuals, at first enthusiastically supported), his exile from Germany with his family in 1933 and finally, his refusal to return there after World War II.

Like the images in the exhibition, Mann, too, wandered between Germany, the USA and Switzerland, wanderings which symbolize refusal and affirmation that nurture one another. Whereas Bartleby simply refused (although he did allow Melville to write about him), for Mann the refusal served as an object and a tool for creation.

Furthermore, Mann's memorials are not just a relic of the past, but something that lives in the present: books that were written and continue to be read. And just as those books may deal with the past yet are constantly imbued with new life, so the double video work of the water jet in Lake Geneva: what goes up must come down ("thou are dust.."), but soon enough the descent turns out to be part of a wider circle. The linearity of time and space is disrupted, for it is unclear in the left-hand channel whether the stream is moving up or down. The circle is closed, yet constantly opens. The cliché maintains that "each end is a new beginning," and as with clichés, the interesting thing is not to say it but to cross it, pass through it and to a certain extent overcome it. Barak's exhibition is both melancholy and optimistic. It refuses to cling to one polarity of "end" or "beginning," "past" or "present," "memory" or "here-and-now experience" and herein lies its strength. It does not tell, it shows, and it not only shows, but also takes in the visitors to the exhibition. It gives them a miniature lifetime experience; and as with every lifetime, although its end is foreseeable, the road itself is open, with many opposing channels that thwart any attempt to toe the line.

iMark Twain, **A Tramp Abroad** [1880], Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1997, p. 171.

iiWalter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in **Illuminations**, translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 257–258.

iiiWalter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty” [1933], in **Selected Writings**, Vol. 2: 1927–1934, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999, p. 734.

ivCharles Baudelaire, **Artificial Paradises: Baudelaire’s Masterpiece on Hashish**, translated by Stacy Diamond, New York: Citadel Press, 1996.

v Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Look,” in **Being and Nothingness**[1943], translated by Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press, 1993.

vi Emmanuel Levinas, **Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority**, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969; see also Hagi Kenaan, **Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics as an Optics** (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2008), p. 22 [Hebrew].

viiWalter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in **Illuminations**, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 155.

viiiHerman Melville, **Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street** [1853], Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2010.

ixThomas Mann, **The Magic Mountain** [1924], translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter, London: Vintage Books, 1999.

x Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” see note 2 above, p. 732.