

TAMI KATZ-FREIMAN

FROM BODY POLITICS TO CONFLICT POLITICS: AZIZ + CUCHER COME OUT OF THE (BIOGRAPHY) CLOSET

Like the pairs of foxes in the biblical story of Samson, tied together by their tails, a flaming torch between them, so Israel and the Palestinians—despite the imbalance of power—drag each other along. Even when we try hard to wrest ourselves free, we burn those who are tethered to us—our double, our misfortune—as well as ourselves.

David Grossman¹

LICENSE: THE INSIDER

June 13, 2006: I am at the Haifa Museum of Art, concluding my lecture on “the demise of the aura” as theorized by Walter Benjamin. I thank the small group of people who made it to the museum, and express my surprise at their interest in attending a lecture that is so manifestly detached from the reality of their lives at that moment—of the missiles falling just thirty miles away from us in the north of Israel. As dusk falls, I leave the museum and catch a cab to the train station, where

I plan to take the train home to Tel Aviv. The harrowing sound of a loud explosion tears through the air. This missile, which exploded right by the Stella Maris Monastery—less than three miles away from the museum—was the first of the missiles that would explode in Haifa over the subsequent weeks. Following that traumatic moment, I did not return to the city until the end of the Second Lebanon War two months later, on August 14 [figs. 44–45](#). Due to an absurd coincidence of the kind typical of Israel’s political conflicts, the museum building happened to be in the proximity of several Hezbollah targets. The artworks were all removed from the walls and put in storage in the building’s basement, and the museum was temporarily closed to the public.

My choice to begin this essay with an account of this surreal wartime experience has to do with the fact that the invitation I received from Aziz + Cucher to contribute

to this catalogue is related not only to my significant involvement with their work over the course of many years, but also with my status as an “insider”—as one who was born into the ongoing conflict that we Israelis tend to refer to simply as “the situation”; I was chosen as one capable of reading their work from a perspective of familiarity, of placing it in the complex context of both the local and the international discourse on political art, and above all of mediating it to an audience that is not intimately familiar with the trials and tribulations of Middle-Eastern reality.

THE SECOND LEBANON WAR: A TURNING POINT

The Second War in Lebanon was an unexpected turning point in Aziz + Cucher’s work—one that played a central role in bringing about the sweeping change that is given expression in their most recent body of work. Following

the outbreak of the war in the summer of 2006, the bubble surrounding this artist duo’s concern with universal questions pertaining to the body and to identity suddenly burst; concrete, violent events began to undermine the emotional immunity that had previously prevented the intrusion of such elements into the iconography of their work. Up until that point, they were convinced that the personal aspects of their biographical identities—the fact that Sammy was raised as a Zionist and that his family lives in Israel, and that Anthony, who was born in the United States, has a large family in Lebanon—were irrelevant to their work. That summer, however, they were struck by the realization that they could no longer work at a distance from the events taking place in their lives, or maintain a barrier between their art and the emotional turmoil provoked by these events. As they wrote in their travel journal, “After witnessing first-hand the terror of

9/11 in our own city, and then the barrage of images of chaos and senseless violence unleashed by the US’ catastrophic, misguided war in Iraq, the 2006 war seemed to be the capstone to a cycle of tragic and absurd inevitability. The unexpected suddenness of this war, and its hopeless display of destructive power on both sides, had an impact on our psyches and our souls that neither of us could have expected.”²

The news from the war front triggered in them both an overwhelming sense of dread and despair that neither one had experienced previously. Even though Sammy’s family was in no immediate danger of being hit by Hezbollah rockets, the two were overcome by a new sense of the fragility and vulnerability of life in Israel. At the same time, they were horrified by the asymmetrical violence that characterized the Israeli response to the Hezbollah attacks, and to the extent of the destruction wrought by



[fig. 44](#)
Rescue workers operating at the site of a building directly hit by a rocket fired from Lebanon in the northern Israeli city of Haifa, July 17, 2006
Photo by Baz Ratner. © 2012 The Associated Press



[fig. 45](#)
A man standing on the rubble of a building in the southern suburbs of Beirut, which was destroyed by Israeli forces during the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, August 23, 2006
Photo by Matt Dunham. © 2012 The Associated Press

the Israeli army in southern Lebanon—as reported by Anthony’s cousins via e-mail to his family in the US.

THE JOURNEY AND THE TRAP

Two years later, spurred on by the combined opportunity of an artist’s residency and a sabbatical, Aziz + Cucher set off on a journey to the heart of the conflict in an attempt to connect, to hunt down relevant images, and perhaps also to reach a better, direct, and unmediated understanding of the region’s complex and painful political reality. As one of their contact people in Israel, I received detailed lists of sites and themes that the two wanted to explore; I introduced them to key figures who would assist them in reaching Ramallah, in the West Bank, as well as in visiting the Israeli town of Sderot, in the vicinity of the Gaza Strip—the target of repeated missile attacks launched by Hamas.

To be perfectly honest, at that stage I doubted that this project would give rise to any visually meaningful result. In Israel, the complexity of the country’s political state is often described as something that “strangers cannot grasp.” There is an understanding of sorts that outsiders have no legitimate claim on making statements about it, and no license to address burning political issues. What, Israelis argue, can such outsiders possibly add to the hackneyed discourse of political art—especially given their lack of intimate familiarity with the tragic narrative in which we are trapped? And how, in any event, can one give visual expression to the complexity of this narrative and take a stance without falling into the familiar trap of politically engaged art, which reduces the conflict to a shallow protest against the Israeli occupation? Such protest, moreover—despite being justified and usually also photogenic—is

more often than not boring and clichéd. Furthermore, cashing in on the political injustices suffered by others for the purpose of achieving artistic success is in itself morally problematic. Aziz + Cucher shared my skepticism concerning the effectiveness of political art in general, and doubted their own ability to give visual expression to the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is so painfully palpable in the lives of those living on both sides of the divide: “What could we possibly say or show that has not been said and shown before by countless other artists from the region, who have a much closer and legitimate relationship to the conflict? How can we address this ‘black hole’ of pessimism and thwarted hopes? How can we possibly give an aesthetic dimension to the carnage?”

THE BEAUTY OF THE CONFLICT

The moral questions concerning the seductive pull of the aesthetics of violence—questions raised by Aziz + Cucher’s travel journal—occupy a central place in the discourse on political art. The problematic nature of representing violent conflicts and making them visible through the prism of various artistic filters, with an emphasis on the paradox inherent to the coupling of violence and aesthetics, has been examined by numerous artists and critical thinkers alike. Ever since the German-Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno pronounced his famous injunction against representing the Holocaust in art (“To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric”),³ artists have repeatedly returned to this subject, metaphorically banging their heads against the wall. Following the attack on the World Trade Center, important contemporary thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek (in his book *Welcome*

to the Desert of the Real) and Paul Virilio (in his book *Art and Fear*) examined the mesmerizing image of the collapsing towers. Both these thinkers attempted to get to the root of our fascination with this horrifying spectacle, arguing that terror and violence may indeed be aesthetic. The German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen even hastened to declare (later apologizing for this statement) that this harrowing moment was one of the most aesthetically powerful experiences in his life. Is it, indeed, even possible to discuss aesthetic values such as composition, line, rhythm, and color in the context of images of war and violence? What is the connection between the ethical and the aesthetic? Between morality and beauty? And what do such tragic events have to do with humor?

HUMOR AS STRATEGY

These fundamental questions were similarly raised during the various editing stages of *Some People*; indeed, the decision to avoid direct representations of violence related to the political conflict clearly reveals an awareness of the problematic nature of such images. The conflict itself—the ongoing state of war, the collective sense of despair, and the lack of any viable solution on the horizon—is perceived, in this context, as a metaphor. Their preoccupation with concrete events led Aziz + Cucher to a series of tragic (albeit also poetic and at times even comic) insights concerning life and the futility of such conflicts. This approach is most strikingly given expression in their self-reflexive work *By Aporia, Pure and Simple*, which occupies a central place in this project. Aziz + Cucher's decision to capture themselves in their studio, in the process of preparing the

exhibition, while dressed as two clowns—each wearing his own ridiculous “national” costume—underscores the absurd quality of their mission, and sarcastically alludes to its futility (fig. 46). In this context, humor becomes a strategy of survival. The helplessness experienced vis-à-vis “the situation” is related by Aziz + Cucher to a recognition of their inability to confront the question of representing the conflict in a serious manner. In their own words, “It is the running gag in our routine: a clown making a foolish entrance in search of an evasive punch-line, walking the tightrope over a precipice of meaning. Juggling affections and positions like wands on fire, hoping that our souls won't get scorched, splitting ourselves into pieces by trying to see this land from all viewpoints at the same time. Tumbling right and left from one side to the other. Tiptoeing on an endless trek over the minefield of equanimity.”

In Aristotle's terms, the clown walking the tightrope is the same *eirôn* (from which the word “irony” is derived) who detracts from his own value and from the value of his achievements in an exaggerated manner. The failures, fears, and mistakes highlighted in the course of his performance deflect our attention from the praiseworthy aspects of his work—his courage, precise maneuvering, and perfect coordination. The use of a tactic borrowed from the world of the circus—the lowest, most popular, and least cerebral of comic genres—underscores the collision between the use of crude comic elements and the emotional and dramatic themes examined in this work. The choice of a comic tactic—the clowning act performed in the studio—is related to the title of this work, which is borrowed from *The Unnamable*, a novel by Samuel Beckett. The narrator rhetorically asks himself: “How do you go on living?” and answers: “By Aporia,



fig. 46

By Aporia, Pure and Simple, 2011
Video still
Single-channel HD video projection, six looped
DVD displays, surround sound, 8:43 mins.

pure and simple.”⁴ The word “aporia” has a typically Beckettian meaning, referring as it does to an irresolvable internal contradiction or disjunction. Indeed, dressed in their circus costumes, Aziz + Cucher are reminiscent of the two clown-like vagabonds waiting at the side of the road for the mysterious Godot to come and redeem them—to quell their inner turmoil, and perhaps even to resolve the conflict in the Middle East.

The representation of the creative process unfolding in the studio in the ironic format of “a day in the life of the artists,” the emphasis on their frustration vis-à-vis the materials they collected in the course of their journey, the cacophonous music (a pastiche of interrupted radio transmissions from the region, combined with news reports in the American media), and the surreal rendition of a traditional Middle-Eastern folk dance that concludes the work—all come together to underscore the spirit of

silliness that pervades this work, and which stands out in stark contrast to the tragedy of the conflict [figs. 47–48].

THE POLITICS OF A DOUBLE / BIFURCATED IDENTITY: THE SHACKLES OF GUILT AND VICTIMHOOD

The artists’ personal biographies were thus woven into the complex texture of the ongoing geo-political conflict in the Middle East. Whereas earlier works by Aziz + Cucher could be described as detached from any concrete reality, this project may well be defined as their “coming out” moment: as they appear center stage, attempting to come to terms with an all-too-familiar political reality, their personal biographies are interwoven, seeming to flood the work and further deepening the set of contradictions that define their identities. As they write in their travel journal, “Before I can say I, it must be said that this I is a divided self, but also multiplied,



figs. 47–48

By Aporia, *Pure and Simple*, 2011
Video stills
Single-channel HD video projection, six looped
DVD displays, surround sound, 8:43 mins.

caught between a lifetime of intimacy and two lifetimes of experience alien to each other but destined to meet and converge in a landscape long longed for, filled with subtle aromas inherited from ancient grandmothers, where warring tribes repeat an endless story that seems to have been going through the same paces since a time older than memory itself.”

Artistic collaborations raise fundamental questions concerning the manner in which decisions are taken and executed, since they are diametrically opposed to the myth of the solitary artist deliberating before an empty canvas. The preoccupation with identity, as complex as it may be, becomes ever more difficult when it involves the identities of two individuals who have been collaborating over the course of two decades. To make things even more complicated, the family narratives of these two artists unfold on opposite sides of the political

divide. As I read their travelogue, which is written in the first person plural and constantly blurs the distinction between their individual identities, I attempt to crack the code of the “self,” to unravel the knotted tangle that makes up this double identity and to stick to the politics of identity I am familiar with, which unfolds in the first person singular. I attempt to forge distinctions: to identify the experience of Anthony visiting his grandfather’s house in Lebanon; to extricate from the plural form the singular combination of embarrassment and pride experienced by Sammy as he attends a military ceremony for his nephew’s army troupe at the Western Wall in Jerusalem [figs. 49–51](#). The bifurcation of identities that formed an inextricable part of this journey is aptly described by the two in the following excerpt from their journal: “I went. I and all my me’s: the me that knows too much already and the me that knows nothing, really, the rootless me

and the all-American me, the tropical mystical me and the northerly skeptical me, the brainwashed me and the subversive me: propelled by a wish to exorcise this anguish by breathing the supercharged air of these coasts and hugging the rugged terrain, and a wish to shed form on a formless void.”

FROM THE SIMULACRUM TO THE REAL—FROM THE REAL TO THE ALLEGORICAL

Whereas in the past Aziz + Cucher’s work could be defined as preoccupied with revealing the metaphorical pathologies associated with progress, with post-human conditions, and with the intersections between the social, the biological, and the technological, these concerns are virtually absent from the world of images that defines *Some People*. The attempt to trace the connection between these earlier works and the current project,

moreover, is far from simple. For by replacing their concern with the politics of the body with an examination of the hard core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and by enlarging their field of vision from a concern with enigmatic, intimate aspects of the body to the conflicted and painful external reality of the Middle East, Aziz + Cucher have crossed all the lines that previously delimited the scope of their work. This sharp transition, as I would like to argue, may well be defined as the replacement of the simulacrum with the real. In 2002, in the context of an earlier exhibition, the two artists defined their lack of faith in the illusory manifestations of a so-called “truth”: “As the eternal debate rages on about the appearance of truth and truth itself, simulation is the only truth we can trust.”⁵ As this statement reveals, their lack of faith in reality led them to consciously uphold the simulacrum as the only essence that could be trusted. Is it possible



Top:
[fig. 49](#)
Anthony Aziz with his Lebanese cousins on the roof of his grandfather’s house, overlooking the valley of Jezzine, Lebanon, October 2009
Photo by George Aziz, Jr.



Bottom:
[fig. 50](#)
The induction ceremony that included Sammy Cucher’s nephew, in front of the Wailing Wall, Jerusalem, June 4, 2009



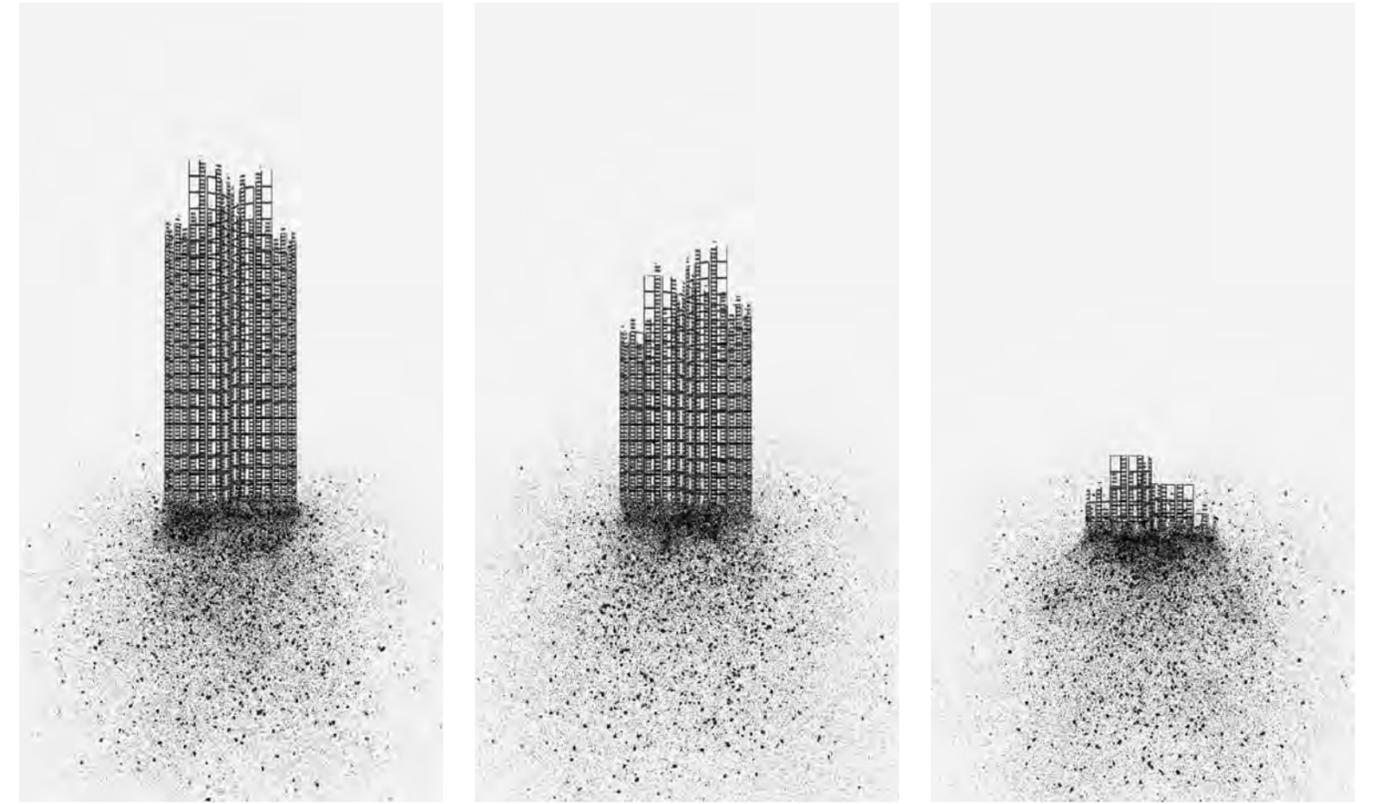
[fig. 51](#)
Sammy with his nephew, standing in front of a Lebanese restaurant in Abu Ghosh, Israel, June 4, 2009

that, in the course of their last journey, their faith was reconquered by the power of the real?

One work that stands out in the context of their most recent body of works, and which may perhaps be seen as a link to earlier videos and digital prints, is the digital animation *Time of the Empress*, which is based on authentic architectural structures photographed in the course of their journey [fig. 52](#). Through a labor-intensive process, the original images have been transformed into architectural drawings suspended in a cyclical loop of construction and dismantling, growth and dissolution, creation and destruction—like a series of Towers of Babel, simultaneously rising and collapsing as in a game of Tetris. The buildings were stripped of all identifying details, as well as of their background and original context, while volume and mass were translated into lines drawn in space. The soundtrack and constant movement allude to the Book of

Ecclesiastes: there is nothing new under the sun, history repeats itself, empires rise and fall, life is but vanity, and time is fleeting and ephemeral. The title of this work, meanwhile, refers to a passage from Marguerite Yourcenar's novel *Memoirs of Hadrian*. This allusion to the autobiographical monologue delivered by the Emperor Hadrian, which touches upon every aspect of human existence—with all of its complexity, changeability, internal contradictions, and dependence on the whims of the body in which it is contained—imbues this work with symbolic significance, and perhaps even serves as a key for understanding the rhetoric of the current exhibition as a whole.

Nevertheless, the replacement of the imagined with the real does not seem to have radically transformed the thought process and practice that define Aziz + Cucher's work. Like fragments of life transformed into poetry, the burning reality of the Middle East, that same reality



[fig. 52](#)
Time of the Empress, 2012
Video stills
Three-channel HD video loop,
stereo sound, 10:33 mins.

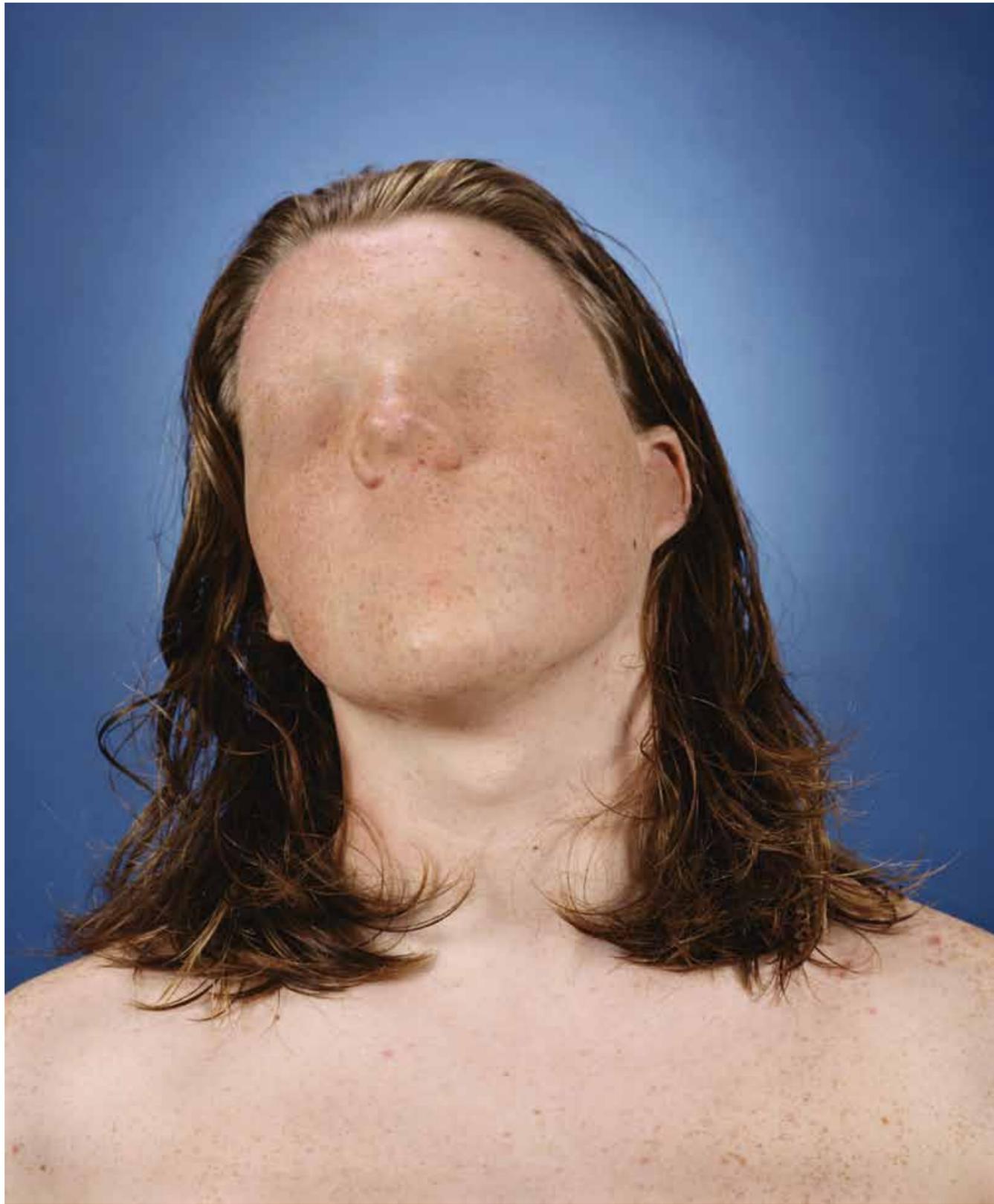


fig. 53
Rick from the *Dystopia* series, 1994–95
C-print, 50 x 40 in.

that was filmed and recorded in a given place at a given time, was processed and distilled through a great number of aesthetic and conceptual filters and strategies of mediation—cuts, doubling, and repetition—so that the resulting work exemplifies the long editing process to which the stuff of reality is subjected before it reaches the viewer in its final, perfectly orchestrated form.

The eccentric dance performance featured in the multi-channel video work *In Some Country Under a Sun and Some Clouds* similarly attests to the manner in which the real becomes allegorical, while movement is transformed into a symbol. The epileptic-like movement of the dancers—who are trapped in a kind of knot against the background of an arid, rocky desert landscape—reminded me of the blindness, muteness, and deafness of the featureless figures that appeared in the earlier series *Dystopia* (1994–95) [fig. 53](#). The dance they perform is

a choreography of paralysis, helplessness, and hesitation that bespeaks terrible vulnerability, wrought nerves, a state of terrible emotional turmoil, and fear of an external reality intruding inwards. The figures' disciplined body movements prevent them from exiting history or entering some kind of future, as they straddle the awkward divide between the comic and the tragic [fig. 54](#).

The desolate desert terrain that serves as a background for these dancing figures contains numerous symbolic meanings, as a site representing various forms of mystification: to begin with, this is the landscape at the core of the Zionist ethos, which centers upon the conquest and re-cultivation of a seemingly uninhabited terrain. At the same time, this terrain, which is devoid of any clear center, symbolizes a state of exile, while its empty and barren expanse seems to impose a state of solitude on whoever enters it. The desert also has biblical

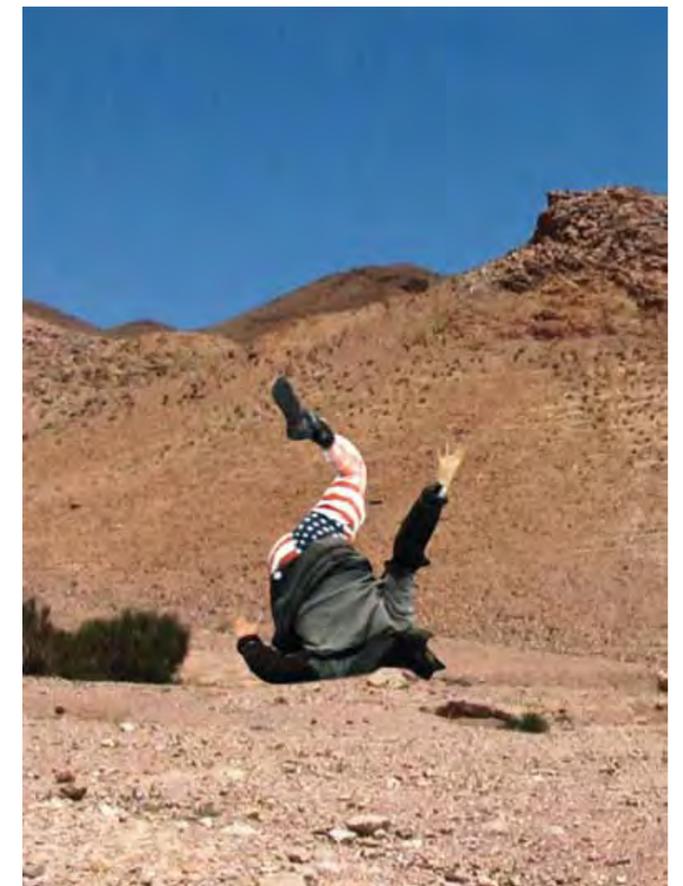


fig. 54
In Some Country Under a Sun and Some Clouds, 2012
Video still
Four-channel HD video projection, surround sound,
13:06 mins.

associations related to the formation of Jewish identity during the Israelites' forty-year-long journey to the Promised Land. The choice to locate these dancing figures in the physical and mental space of the nomad, and in the birthplace of the ancient Jewish Zealots, creates associations with extreme perceptual and bodily sensations—beauty, horror, and above all a paralyzing experience of frustration vis-à-vis the futility of endless bloodshed—as if the unease of being inside the body is united here with the sense of unease and desperation experienced vis-à-vis the current state of things—of existence itself as it is experienced in this part of the world.

THE ABSURD THEATER OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The existential world view, extreme pessimism, and sarcastic humor that are given expression in this body of works call to mind the rhetoric of Beckett's plays—the

striving toward the essence of the self through a recognition of the nullity of human existence, and of man's entrapment in the endless, hopeless repetition of narratives centered on various forms of compensation and revenge. The static and robotic movement of the "dancers" in the desert echoes the movement that defines Beckett's theater of the absurd—a movement that is examined and studied allegorically in relation to an underlying state of immobility. The existence of the body, in Beckett's plays, is always defined through a state of lack or negation. Here too, the dancers' movements appear as a forced attempt to counter their inability to move—as an allegory for man's loss of control over his life, and an expression of his helplessness vis-à-vis the politics of injustice.

The perception of time in Aziz + Cucher's project is similarly reminiscent of Beckettian time, which is

devoid of a chronological, linear structure. In the same way that *Waiting for Godot* is not a narrative account, but rather an in-depth examination of a static condition, so the "archaeologists," the "clowns" in the studio, and the "dancers" in the desert give expression to an externally imposed and endlessly repeated state of stasis that is entirely futile. The more things change, the more they remain the same: violence triggers further violence, which in turn triggers even more violence, and so on and so forth until the end of time—a state of existence imbued by the recognition that hope itself is nothing but the last illusion. As is the case in Beckett's work, here too the only attempt at redemption is the attempt to give expression to the experience of existence in words or in art—even though this attempt itself is doomed to fail.

TIME CAPSULE: ARCHAEOLOGY AS METAPHOR

The archaeological site featured in the video work *A Report from the Front* may be similarly read as an allegory that reveals the manipulative nature of the archaeological practice, and provokes thoughts about an archaeology of the future in the aftermath of an impending catastrophe. In this work, the absurd and futile quality grows even stronger, as does the sarcastic political stance of the artists both in relation to the Middle East and in relation to American mechanisms of control. In this work, Aziz + Cucher combined documentary footage from archaeological excavations in Israel (at Bethsaida, north of the Sea of Galilee—the site of an ancient Jewish settlement that was conquered by the Romans, and the birthplace of three of the apostles) with a fictional transmission that fuses authoritative police reports from real and imagined sites of disaster [fig. 55](#).



[fig. 55](#)
A Report from the Front, 2012
 Video stills
 Single-channel HD video, stereo
 sound, 4:35 mins.



The Sisyphean work of the archaeologists digging into the ground to excavate various finds, which they then brush, wash, sift, gather, classify, and register—functions as a key visual axis in this work. These actions acquire a harrowing significance when viewed together with the soundtrack emitted from a series of loudspeakers, which addresses an invisible audience (journalists at a press conference?) as if in the aftermath of a military attack or nuclear disaster. Fragmented sentences such as “damage to the linking process,” “last year’s crisis of re-interpretation,” “the objects are safe,” “alert-level orange,” “trans-historical contamination,” or “the outcome of the intrusion of doubt” provoke a sense of horror combined with a ridiculous quality. The surreal narrative points toward a future Armageddon, and renders the question of ownership over the land manifestly irrelevant.

It is important to remember that in Israel, more than anywhere else in the world, archaeology is a key ingredient in the country’s political hodgepodge. Pervaded as it is by national, ideological, and theological interests, archaeology plays a central role in public debates, while archaeological artifacts are exploited for different political purposes in a seemingly unprecedented manner. Early on in the history of Zionism, archaeology came to be perceived as an arena for forging a national identity, while Zionist mythology conscripted the biblical past into the service of both the present and the future. Over time, the purportedly sacred argument concerning the historical right of the Jewish people to build a national home in its land was sustained by determining the importance of archaeological finds according to their degree of compatibility with the biblical narrative. In recent years, the “new archaeologists” affiliated with post-Zionist thought have

begun to voice doubts concerning the historical value of biblical stories, which they view as no more than myths designed to endow the Jewish people with an impressive genealogy. At present, archaeology in Israel is no longer perceived as a romantic mission undertaken in the service of the Jewish people’s national revival, but rather as a poignant parable for the contested claims underlying the present conflict.

In this context, Aziz + Cucher’s engagement with archaeological practices may be viewed as an ironic strategy, which enables them to perceive the past as a reflection both of the present and of a catastrophic future. Archaeology allows them to move freely forwards and backwards in time—casting a reflexive gaze on a past surrounded by the aura of antiquity, and upon the political and ideological manipulation of archaeological vestiges in the service of national goals. Their disturbing fusion

of different historical periods—the allusion to the ancient rule of Tiglath-Pileser III or of the Cypro-Phoenician kingdom, alongside the use of contemporary terms and technologies (the UN decision concerning the foundation of the state of Israel, the cracking of the DNA code, chromosomes)—amplify the potential of a future catastrophe. The key sentence: “We must never forget: those who own history—own the land,” raises various questions, and even perhaps a hidden hope—can the definitive identification of various artifacts indeed determine the fate of the conflict once and for all?

EPILOGUE: THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

The personal, biographical experiences related to the political events experienced by Aziz + Cucher in the course of their journey are codified through images, narrative fragments, strategies of hybridization, and various forms

of resonance and repetition—forming a language that enables them to move in the space between the political and the aesthetic. It seems that the statement “the personal is the political”—which may equally be rephrased as “the political is personal”—aptly sums up the current body of works: the physical presence of these two artists and their personal stories take center stage for the first time, while appearing alongside themes and images culled from a conflicted public sphere. It seems that the prism through which Aziz + Cucher observe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a universal prism—one that provides a view of the human condition, and which places the local conflict in the global context of life in the age of terror.

Albert Camus aptly expressed this existential sense of absurdity in “The Myth of Sisyphus”: “In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived

of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.”⁶ Indeed, despite the concrete, real quality of the characters featured in this project—the artists themselves disguised as clowns, the self-conscious young soldiers participating in a military ceremony, or the men and women working on an archaeological excavation—they are all transformed from actual people into abstract representations of ideas and symbols. It seems that the principle of the absurd, which rules the violent trap into which the local conflict has fallen, has disrupted the possibility of a coherent narrative or sense of place, divesting these figures of their biographical stories; as a result, this principle itself is transformed into the protagonist of the allegory represented in this project.

Finally, a couple of words about the title of this exhibition, which was borrowed from a poem by the Polish

poet Wislawa Szymborska that begins: “Some people fleeing some other people. / In some country under the sun / and some clouds.”⁷ These lines are almost comical, projecting the image of crudely drawn hordes of tiny human beings fleeing across a vast expanse of earth, while their fate is determined by forces greater and more powerful than any one individual. This poignant image of displacement, flight, and fear, and the description of small, insignificant human gestures in the face of terrible uncertainty, inspired Aziz + Cucher to take the first steps toward the creation of this project.

But I have chosen to conclude with an excerpt from another poem by Szymborska, which is titled “Children of Our Age”—a text which reveals that a commitment to live in our conflicted world inevitably condemns individuals to a “political life”:

*We are children of our age,
it's a political age.*

*All day long, all through the night,
all affairs—yours, ours, theirs—
are political affairs.*

*Whether you like it or not,
your genes have a political past,
your skin, a political cast,
your eyes, a political slant.*

*Whatever you say reverberates,
whatever you don't say speaks for itself.*⁸

Essay translated by Talya Halkin

- 1 “Gaza Success Proves Israel Is Strong, Not Right,” *Haaretz*, January 20, 2009.
- 2 All statements by Aziz + Cucher are quoted from their travel journal and from the blog they wrote during and after this journey. See http://azizcucher.blogspot.com/2009_05_01_archive.html.

- 3 Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, 1967), p. 19.
- 4 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York, 1970), p. 3.
- 5 Aziz + Cucher as quoted in my essay for the brochure accompanying their solo exhibition *Passage* at the Herzliya Museum for Contemporary Art, Israel, June 2002.

- 6 Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, 1958), p. 6.
- 7 Wislawa Szymborska, “Some People,” *Miracle Fair*, trans. Joanna Trzeciak (New York, 2001), p. 55.
- 8 Wislawa Szymborska, “Children of Our Age,” *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, trans. Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York, 1995), p. 149.