

Faten Nastas & Jabra Mitwasi, Overloaded, 3.10.99- 28.10.99

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Text by Itzhak Benyamini

"... theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight."

Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History, I

The Israeli viewer of Palestinian art feels as though he must formulate the political contexts within which this art transpires. This "as though", which flattens the work of any Palestinian to the narrow political/militant context, narcissistically links every artistic and non-artistic Palestinian act directly to himself, namely to the Israeli spectator, for "anything external is tied to the Israeli, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Vis-a-vis this "as though", one must seek the essence of the Palestinian work of art not in its relation to the Israeli subject, but rather in a more neutral place; pursue it from a different perspective.

One possible way of discussing the work is through the key transition point which generates an internal transformation in the photographic/editorial rhythm: The gaze of Christ, the icon, emerging for a few seconds at the heart of the work, splitting it into two contrasting planes. The work commences with a running-shot along a desolate, barren desert and a fragmentary gasping-shot of Bethlehem, until the eyes of Christ lead to an-other-shot, more internal photography.

The eyes are those of the 7th century Byzantine icon of Christ Pantokrator found at St. Catherine's Monastery, embodying both aspects of Christ – the divine and the human: His divine nature is represented shadow-less, whereas his human nature is depicted shaded. This knowledge is not explicitly expressed in the video piece: We see only the eyes of Christ, the eyes of a human God, the Son of God who perceives the believer as equal in relation to God.

The child-God is introduced into the Father's world (vis-a-vis the Father's-Judaism and the Father's-Islam) and revealed to his disciples: **"Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me"** (Matthew 18: 3-5). The child is the Lord, thus he is the believer: **"And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father"** (Galatians 4:6). The sons, once they have constituted their faith through the gaze of the Savior Son, use the Son in order to break free from the evil world of the Father Jehovah: **"... our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father"** (Galatians 1:3-4).

The eyes of the Savior-Son evoke the child within the photographing-subject (as well as within the viewer?). The photographing-subject, which is in a state of *in-der-Welt-sein* (being-in-the-world), scurries around the barren desert, susceptible to Satanic temptations; he observes a ruined universe and the ruins of his current world, at sunrise/sunset; pauses on the screen's-blackness; breathing heavily; fragmentarily photographing his ever-renovated city of Bethlehem (his birthplace, like that of the Blessed Infant), with its ambulance, its firemen, its passersby, its sense of suffocation. The camera's eye repeatedly chances upon the distress of the working children selling codfish, a stolen VCR, a newspaper. A building is on fire, ambulances and fire engines are called to the scene, a tractor is working – pawns in a non-gratifying game for adults and quasi-kids. The eye takes us back again to the same

scenes, to the UN gas tanker (another toy, not exclusively for kids). Rescue forces and photographic claustrophobia. Who will rescue the photographing-subject? And an Israeli road block and a flag are also featured (into which, as aforesaid, the present-Israeli-writing-subject will not delve, due, *inter alia*, to the work's structure which strives to push aside the "political"). Earning a living or supporting their families, the world's *real proletariat*, Rachel's children forsaken in the evil world of the Father – the father, King Herod, slaughtering them, until the coming of the Blessed Son: **"In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not"** (Matthew 2: 18; according to Jeremiah 31:14).

All of a sudden, interrupting the heavy breathing, Christ's eyes are opened, big eyes. The **photographing**-subject – henceforth converted through Christ's gaze into being a **photographed**-subject – withdraws into his own world: quasi-nostalgic scenes upon scenes, cycles upon cycles, revolving around studies, family, friends; and particularly childhood. A tremendous desire to belong; yearning for a warm and naive sense of community; for Christian introverted love. Toward the end, both photographed-subjects extend a hand to paint an innocent child-like painting: a boy flying a kite, flowers, a girl in a dress, a simple-structured church, a sun – the sun (like the eye of Christ, the Savior, the children's Child) sets, concluding the work.

Christ's gaze constructs the Christian-narcissistic community of sons: Christ, the Son of God, is the object of identification for members of the community. Or to use Lacanian terminology: the community is formed on the *imaginary*² level, just as in the Mirror Stage³ the ego constitutes its own identity through identity games with its reflection in the mirror. This is the *imaginary* drenching in the blood of Christ (as opposed to the *symbolic* texture of the Father Jehovah, the Father of Jewish Law)⁴. Christ's gaze is not the *real*, separating gaze of the "evil eye"⁵, but rather the one merging, structuring, uniting the child within the photographed-subjects. As the patron of children, Christ's eyes deconstruct only that which is gathered around the child, the surplus of life, toward salvation. A recess from the oppressive adult existence of Bethlehem, from politics, back to the child.

It is Christ who unites the Christians under that very *imaginary*, to form the family of sons in Christ (according to the Pauline principle of "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"), through baptism into Him, which eliminates the alienated/detached subject: **"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise"** (Galatians 3: 26-29) – Baptism is where the Christian is baptized in Christ's death, leaving his old world toward a "new creation" in the eschatological sense, so that in the *imaginary* and "organic" community everyone is equal in love and are subordinate to the One signifier, Christ. The same holds true for the photographed-subject clinging to Christ's eyes as if he were experiencing an act of baptism into the Savior, death in Christ toward life: **"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life"** (Romans 6: 3-5). The photographed-subject/believer experiences the phase of liminality⁶ inherent in the very act of baptism, in recognizing Christ's gaze – a diffuse/obscure state where his identity momentarily dissolves in order to assume a new identity: neither Faten nor Jabra, neither Palestinian nor Israeli, neither Christian nor Muslim, but rather Jesus Christ, a child. Amen!

Notes:

1. In ancient Greek: 'In Christ'. See quote from Galatians in the text.
2. Following Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic distinction between the three 'orders' or 'registers': The *imaginary* structures the ego in narcissistic mirror-image-dependent contexts;

the *symbolic* is the realm of the Law, of language, and of the Father; the *real* is the non-*symbolic*, that which cannot or must not be represented in language.

3. See in particular: Jacques Lacan. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience (1949)." *Écrits* (A Selection). Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1995, 1-7.

4. For an elaborate discussion of the link suggested between Christianity and the *imaginary*, see: Itzhak Benyamini, "Between the Law and *das Ding*: Between Lacan and St. Paul," *Resling* (A Multi-disciplinary Stage for Culture) 5, Summer 1998, pp. 42-61 [Hebrew]; *The Pauline Ritual and the Constitution of the Sons' Community: A Psychoanalytical-Lacanian Reading of the Pauline Letters* (Thesis submitted for MA degree). Tel Aviv University, 1999 [Hebrew].

5. Compare to the way in which Lacan presents the "evil eye" as a gaze referring to the *objet petit a*: Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis (Seminar XI)*, 1964. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books, 1994, pp. 115-119.

6. Based on Victor Turner's theory of the ritual's three-phase structure, especially with regard to *rite de passage*. See: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

Faten Fawzy Nastas (Beit-jala, 1975)

Palestinian artist. Lives and works in Bethlehem.

1998 B.F.A., Department of Fine Art, Bezalel Academy of Arts & Design, Jerusalem.

1999 "Overloaded", Heinrich Boll Foundation, Tel Aviv*

1999 "Palestin(a) – Woman's Art from Palestine", Al-Wasiti Art Center, Jerusalem, Ami Steinitz – Contemporary Art Gallery, Tel Aviv

1998 "Per Video", Ludwig Museum, Cologne, Germany

1998 "Flag-Nation-Flag", Pyramid Gallery, Haifa

1997 "Family stories, the family within the collection of the Israeli painting", Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Jabra Mitwasi (Kuwait, 1974. Came to Beit-Jala c. 1990)

Palestinian calligraphy artist. Lives and works in Bethlehem.

1997 Studied at Bethlehem University, Bethlehem, Palestine

1999 "Overloaded – Video Installation", Heinrich Boll Foundation*

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