

ART PAPERS



Down to Earth: Orit Raff speaks with Lauri Firstenberg

In Orit Raff's film *Palindrome*, 2001, the artist performs a repetitive and cryptic task, rolling a mound of felt inside the confines of an igloo. This footage is edited with appropriated images of a coyote in its wintry natural habitat. *Palindrome* (see contents page) is part of *Hunt-the-Slipper*, 2001, a larger project where the artist utilizes various media, from photography and video to architectonic installation, in order to re-enact fractured memories and encounters. Memory and myth are central to the creation of a cultural anti-narrative in which operations of defamiliarization create a circuitous reading of identity's dislocated coordinates.

Raff's larger project is based on the recounting of a privatized history, translated into ethereal visual terms.


Her engagement with a unique mode of minimalist photography marks a distancing from corporeal representation and speaks to the overdetermination of the figure in the visual field. Raff has invented a kind of portraiture—or anti-portraiture—that does not rely on the body, but indexes subjectivity abstractly. Photographs of faint bodily trace—the white interiors of vacant freezers, stained linens, scarred pots, and graffitied desks—serve as specters of the absent subjects. In the case of her *(Dis)located Land* series, 2001, the bodily surrogates are dust and detritus from the artist's apartment, aesthetic and abject materializations of the uncannily unnamable subject.

Raff engages culture and subjectivity as productive forces that resist a controlled order of meaning. Enlisting a range of media and conceptual strategies, she addresses identity, language, history, memory and place as mutable, plural and generative constructions. Her work attempts to shirk easy assimilation into established categories of cultural identity and aesthetic values. A model for the examination of indistinct spaces, temporalities, and subjectivities, Raff's work is representative of a young generation of international artists negotiating a web of complex and politicized propositions, vacillating between local legibility and global alliances. Raff seeks aesthetic models that dislocate or obfuscate singular, totalizing or fixed cultural positions, and invest in meaning's contradictory moments of assertion and accession.

LAURI FIRSTENBERG Do you view your work as a kind of poetic abstraction, in tension with your representational and quasi-narrative approach?

ORIT RAFF I do not want my work to remain in the realm of the abstract but rather to hover between the spaces of the abstract and the representational, creating conflict and collision. This negotiation of multiple and contradictory entry points marks an attempt to create a slower viewing pace. There is a political dimension to my work but I approach it quietly, through metaphor.

A continual thread in the work is to question memory and the processes by which we remember. The work encourages a certain



Orit Raff, Untitled (Glass on paper towel), 1997, c-print, 20 x 20 inches (courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery, New York)

Opposite: Orit Raff, still from *Thirty Times the Length of My Breath*, 2000, DVD projection, 2:00 minutes (projected in a loop) (courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery, New York)

jolting of perception. I am interested in moments of misrecognition, followed by apprehension, which I associate with the workings of memory.

In my early work, I photographed studio-built miniatures or elaborately detailed sets of domestic spaces, rooms, and outdoor spaces such as playgrounds and forests. The inhabitants of the sets would engage in various activities such as bathing, playing hide-n-seek, urinating. This work was inspired by fairy tales, Israeli folk tales, and imprints (psychological and physical) on the body. I then decided I wanted to explore narrative in a different way, to focus on the trace itself. I experimented with indexicality and absence that implies presence. Could these impressions contain and relay a narrative? I have engaged in an ongoing exploration of how marginal details, and later, the peripheral spaces that inflect our daily routine, reveal personal, cultural and political meaning.

How does your engagement with the moving image relate to your photography? For each series, it seems that you work on a body of photographs and a series of related videos concurrently.

I have always been interested in film and video. The reason for using both media is that I can't really help it—I see and feel in both. I try to create a multi-layered experience, a space that transforms.

My longing to return to the figure also factors in my choice of medium. I could only find access to the body in video. The question of time is crucial. I visualize the body in constant movement. Even in

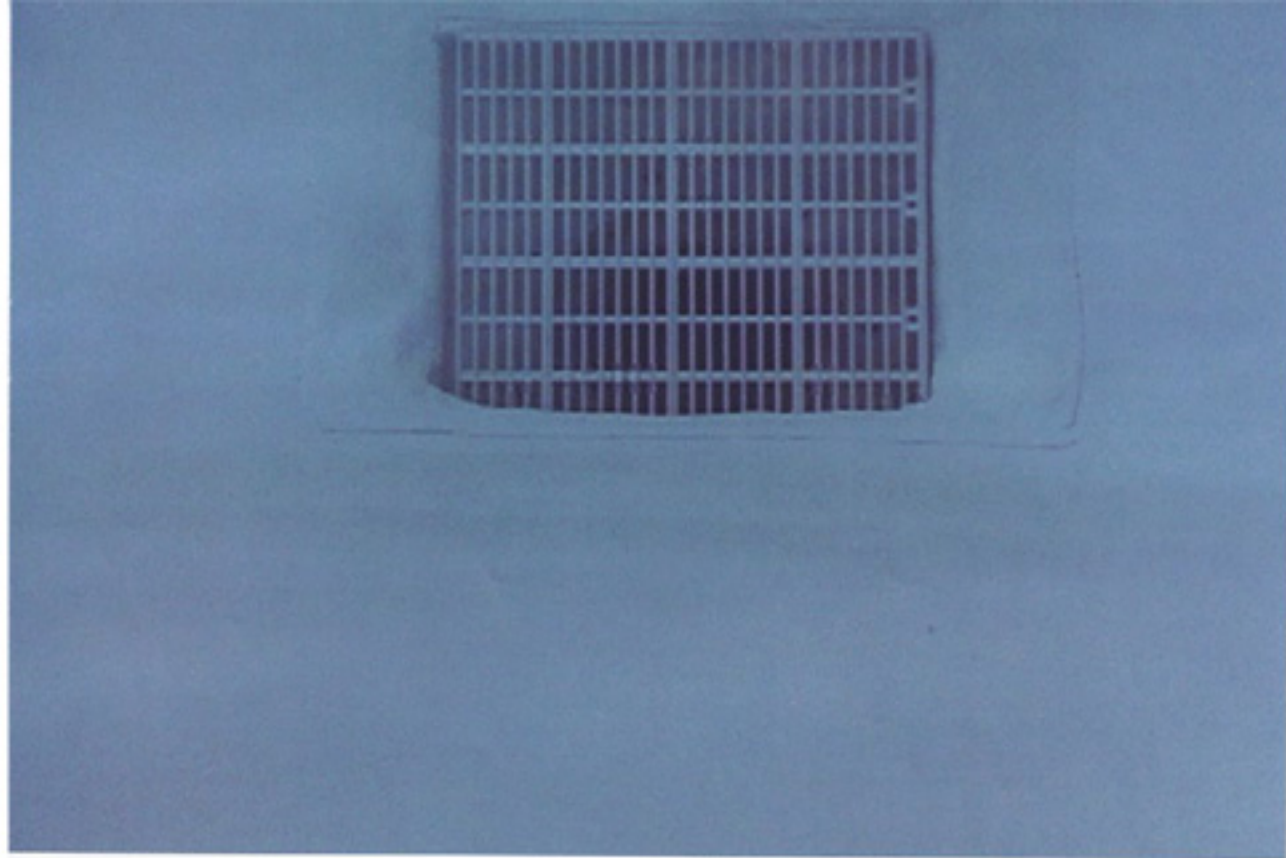
videos where the figure does not actually appear, an implied presence participates in the performative that preoccupies me.

When combining the two media, I try to create several pitches of representation and experience. Through video, I expose questions of dislocation and transformation that are slightly veiled in my photography.

How do you think this shift in storytelling strategy succeeds in the context of *Hunt-the-Slipper*?

All the components conceptually address issues of memory and place. They also share a similar language, based on quiet minimalist gestures. I hope that, by working in multiple languages, certain ideas are punctuated, surface, retreat, and collide with others. The *(Dis)located Land* photo series resulted from my attempt to collect all of the dust in my New York apartment. The *Dust Catchers*—accompanying installation elements displayed on a formica and glass floor structure—were all obsessively crocheted by my grandmother in Haifa, Israel. I wanted to articulate this dialogue between our four hands. If our process is anchored in real space and time, I nonetheless seek to insert distancing effects into the work, to incorporate an element of fiction in order to mirror memory.

The videos from *Hunt-the-Slipper* also emphasize the obsessiveness of trying to capture and save something that is elusive. The protagonist—the role I inhabit—performs a Sisyphean task in an endless loop. This idea of creating an archive, a collection of obsessions, memories, and fictions led to experimentation in concurrent mediums. The series shares in a vision of domesticity that flips from the familiar to



the foreign. This dislocation is understood in terms of the uncanny. My interest in making things strange informs the overarching experience of the discrete works. I am invested in playing with spaces in an effort to create a place where viewing and moving intersect; where distinctions between inside and outside, vertical and horizontal dissolve, pushed to a point where our experience of Euclidean space is challenged.

Your photography tends to approach its subject through surrogates—space, object, trace. The videos turn back to the body in its totality. Why this distinction? You mention that the time-based medium allowed you to place your performing body in a space of action and transformation. Could you elaborate on the articulation and formation of the subject in your video work?

Many of my decisions are intuitive. I think the distinction I make grows from the very nature of the medium. We make assumptions in approaching video that differ from photography, and I play off of these presumptions. Photography bears an eternal quality by means of its stillness. In freezing a moment in time, it is preoccupied with the present-past. According to Roland Barthes, photography is proof of presence, of being, of that which has been there. I play with the indexical nature of photography; strip it down to its most basic act—the transcription of light on a sensitized surface. The traces that I photograph mirror the photographic act as scratches on the surface. I photograph the trace, that which is no longer there, a representation of presence, of an inhabiting body. By photographing these marginal

details—stains, traces, dust, dirt—I bring them to the center of vision, allowing them to exist and prevail. The signs of life that I capture, such as strands of hair, dust in an apartment, and furniture imprints on a carpet, are intimately connected to the body. No markers can create a more universal dialogue between personal and collective memory.

Time is inherent to video. With time come the qualities of change, transformation, temporality and performance that are at the core of my practice. In my filmic work I focus on the body performing, slipping, adapting. The body is fragile in that it tries to accomplish something futile. I am interested in the failed preoccupation of the subject. In earlier videos the body is present, as in the photographs, through a trace, breath or movement. In order to make the video *Thirty Times The Length Of My Breath*, 2000, for example, I focused on the drain at the bottom of the deep-end of an Olympic-size swimming pool. Holding my breath for two minutes, I videotaped the drain as water and air make their way into its pull. The body is present through my lack of breath, the breath of the drain itself and the swimmers above me. Subtle transformation takes place, thus emphasizing how movement in space mimics narrative movement.

Let's take up this issue of the "performing body" further, particularly because the body in question is yours. What discourses of performance are you gesturing to in your play of memory and fantasy in autobiography? What of the more literal gestures of self-insertion? Your new series, *The Moon Tastes Like Letters*, 2004, harks back to a childhood memory, as well as to mythology and literature, and

visually imprints your presence as a specter of the near past. Can you speak about the genesis of this project as well as how you see it expanding upon your previous work? What new direction do you see this work taking, particularly regarding your interests in personal, architectural, institutional space, femininity, domesticity, and notions of the uncanny?

The works and writings of Mary Kelly, Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta and Joan Jonas have informed and inspired my work. It made great sense for me to use my own body, to explore the body's potential and limitations, to insert my body, to be part of a public space but experience it differently. Private memory blurring public memory, and the individual body intersecting with the social body are concerns that are crucial to my work. That's how I became the suitable subject. I test the waters to see if my own personal experiences and stories connect with a wider, collective heritage. I think that coming from Israel and being raised as a child in the United States inflects my work. My identifications with a young country of immigrants and with culturally assimilated European grandparents serve as points of departure for my work's preoccupations—dislocation, memory, transformation, repetition, self-insertion.

In the video *Able was I ere I saw Elba*—*Palindrome*, 2001, I deal with those issues while I create a dialogue with Beuys. I was interested in the idea of transformation as a human and as an artist, how he erased his past and created a new life. I wanted to transfer his gestures to the domestic space, however, to make them less epic, more human. I am trying to warm up in a space where I will fail to do so.

I would like to ask a question that I normally would not dare to ask. During your pregnancy, your work on bread—baking bread, eating bread, vomiting bread, destroying bread—decidedly echoed the forthcoming birth of your daughter. I hate to impose a kind of literal biographical reading on such poeticized work, but would you be open to speak to the experiential and conceptual encounters that informed your work at that time?

The *Insatiable* project consists of two videos that work as one piece and a new third video. While producing the videos I was thinking about ceremonies involving bread. Beyond their frequent religious signification, these ceremonies are acts of social unification and formation of cultural connections. Similar rituals may be found in my earlier video pieces. The first part of the video titled *A roundabout*



This page: Orit Raft, still from *A Roundabout (Fertility/Futility)*, 2004, DVD, 40 minutes, (courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery, New York)

Opposite: Orit Raft, from *The Moon Tastes Like Letters*, 2004, pair of blueprints, 40 x 30 inches each, (courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery, New York)



(fertility/futility), 2004, shows my hands crumbling an old, dry, stale and hardened loaf of bread. The loaf of bread is held close to my stomach, and I continuously sand the hard crust and tear through it. A lot of physical effort is involved. The second section, *A roundabout*, shows dough baking and rising in an oven. It takes time for the bread to bake and for me to crumble the stale loaf. In this work I wanted to emphasize the multiple metaphors bread takes on. Several ideas come together in this work: bread as body in conflict; *lehem* [bread in Hebrew] echoing the Arabic word *lachim* [meat]; bread as a site of conflict; bread as home; the magical qualities of bread; bread as life and sustenance in relation to women's life-giving; the action of trying to make something better, to repair it, to bring it to life but ruin it in the end; bread as labor; bread and salt/sweat; a childhood memory of bread/dough as one of the first materials we use to make art. It is true that I was pregnant while finalizing this video. Though I am very nervous to connect this work in such a direct way with my pregnancy, that connection can't be avoided and ignored. What does it mean to bring a baby in such fragile and unsettling times? Though it sounds cliché, it was also for me an act of hope.

The linguistic aspect of this project is very important for me. A video will be projected horizontally and will show a tray filled with salt. I will draw Hebrew words in the salt; they are all spelled with the same three letters, in different order. I will start with bread [*lhm*]. In Hebrew, *lhm* also spells to fight, to wage war. Wind will erase the word. I will then write bread backwards, *mlh*, which means forgive; then salt (*mlh*); then salt spelled backwards, *hlm*, meaning dream.

Regarding your newest series *The Moon Tastes Like Letters*, can you speak to the introduction of the blueprint in the work? Imprints of your body from your bed mattress are recorded as daily diagrammatic maps, a spatial and temporal record of an anonymous subject, later revealed as a series of self-portraits, if you will. I particularly like the multiple points of entry to this corpus, opened by the multiple myths

at play—personal, cultural and art historical. The ghost of Yves Klein also lies in this bed. This confluence of entry points creates a climate of irrationality, friction, and often a failure of legibility.

This work addresses the intersection of private and collective memory. The project *The Moon Tastes Like Letters* consists of a series of thirteen pairs of vertical blueprints. These images accentuate only the contours of bed sheets and the traces of bodies. The bed is a metaphor for hunger, passions and dreams. The blueprint, which is a line print (different from a photograph which is tonal), invokes architecture, floor plans and the home. It retains a diagrammatic feeling, while visually evoking the sea, with tide charts.

I also wanted to achieve a moonlit, powdery quality, something ephemeral, temporal, and fragile as a blueprint fades with time. The quality of the blueprint, reminiscent of a Xerox copy, blurs and erases the fine details that usually appear in photographs. In this way, the work speaks of erasure, and not only documentation. The bed, which is familiar, becomes strange. Each pair of prints features the positive and negative of the same bed, a metaphor for the moon that shines at night, and sometimes during the day. Each pair represents one month in a leap year. This duality is also an allusion to the *blue moon*—the second full moon in a calendar month, a phenomenon that occurs, on average, once every two-and-a-half years. I wanted this work to take the viewer on an imaginary journey that crosses borders, places, cultures, and societies. ☾

Lauri Firstenberg is completing her Ph.D. in the History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University. Her upcoming curatorial projects include *Isaac Julien: True North* at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles (July–October 2005) and *An Image Bank for Everyday Revolutionary Life*, co-curated with Anton Vidokle and presented at REDCAT in Los Angeles and Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros in Mexico City in 2006.