

A Report to an Academy

On Michal Heiman's *Through the Visual:*

A Tale of Art that Attacks Linking, 1917-2008

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Validity

“Attacks on linking,” clarification of terms: Link – a unit serving to connect one element with another, elements that were separate from each other prior to the act of linking; Attacking a link entails isolating details, releasing them from other details, damaging connections, preserving autonomy; it entails rising against the stable signification that a sequence of elements may create, rising against co-dependency and reciprocal relationships, against punctuation, against the illusion of coherence of whatever may make itself heard/seen.

And yet in the lecture/video work *A Tale of Art that Attacks Linking* – which refers to the essay “Attack on Linking” by psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion – there is order, progression, a beginning and an end. The work links Michal Heiman’s previous works with psychoanalytic texts, autobiographic diaries, clinical case studies, other artists’ works, childhood memories, and daily events. She creates a link only to attack it, for resistance to a link is first and foremost an act of a second order, a parasitic act of ascription or analysis; the knowledge manifested in the link must be displayed center stage in order to be analyzed – that is, destroyed. The creative and destructive acts are interwoven, dependent on each other in their contiguous existence, and that is Michal Heiman’s scandal, that is her transgression.

An act of linking entails the creation of a boundary line: in order to link, one must first draw a boundary delineating discrete units, point out their beginning and end so that they may be joined together, composed into a whole that also has a beginning and an end. Thus a link, like any boundary, cannot exist unless it may be violated, and has no real existence except in the gesture that is transmitted through it and negates it. The quintessential attack on linking takes place at the moment when a link is present, bearing testimony to the link and thus requiring it for its own existence. A link, however, cannot exist as such unless there are forces threatening its destruction: the forces of loneliness and discontinuity, the forces of autonomy and unequivocalness, which the link seeks to overcome.

The point of contact between a link and an attack is an odd intersection of two movements, each exchanging its being with the other: the link is violated by the attack, and through that violation it attains the utmost limit of its being; it demonstrates its unity in the very process of losing it.

Heiman saves and attacks, testifying to the whole and undermining it. Her video series from 2001 to 2008 – interwoven (together with the series *Daughtertype*) into her lecture/video *A Tale of Art that Attacks Linking* – is concerned with testimony, violence, saving and instability, and that is the source of both its validity and violence. The work is both a practice and an array: the witness's psyche is the battlefield where a fight in retreat is mounted against the catastrophe lurking around the corner, as the day emerges, at the corner of the eye, as an image breaks forth, extracted from memory, striking the consciousness and disturbing its daily routine. They accumulate, these attacks, creating maps, arms, arrays and fluctuations; oscillating between tactics of observation and the turning of a blind eye, internalization and denial, progress and withdrawal. They mobilize forces to hold the lines: fragments of Sophie Calle, Aviva Uri, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Samuel Beckett, an anonymous woman walking the streets of Tel Aviv; fragments adjoining each other, squatting by one another, also parting from each other as time passes by – that is, as the horror builds up. The attacks generate their own protocol, their own law, arranging the testimonies, assessing, judging and deciding, as well as carrying out the sentence: making it possible to give a lecture.

Giving a Lecture

A erudite, scholarly lecture, based on sources, presenting a new viewpoint on its subject – all these are academic notions that turn a lecture into a wellspring of platitudes and placation. There are rules to lecturing: first and foremost, there is an audience, at which the knowledge is aimed. The audience sits in chairs, silently, facing the speaker; it is rude to speak during a lecture. Walking around the lecture hall, standing up, going on stage – these are all utterly forbidden acts. Everybody listens and looks, or pretends to listen, from the beginning of the lecture to its end. But here, in Michal Heiman's lecture/video, there is no immediate, direct audience present in order to "get" what it can. The soundtrack is different: silence, throat clearing, the occasional cough, handclapping and questions at the end are all absent from this lecture. The Attacks on Linking are presented in a museum: the spectators stand, talk, express their opinions in an unseemly commotion. The addressees enter in the middle, leave before the end, hear the end before the beginning. The lecture is removed

from its natural, academic space, turning into an attack on the ceremony of imparting knowledge. The ceremony is attacked while, at the same time, the lecture continues uninterrupted, in an endless cycle, creating knowledge in order to attack the conditions of its realization.

And yet, the research question remains present: Did Bion suffer from shell shock? No, that is not the question. The question is: Does Michal Heiman suffer from shell shock? Is the audience peeking in the victim of shell shock, the shock of being attacked?

To the Tel Aviv Museum of Art come women who lie in their beds, women who are locked up in their rooms, stacked on heaped up plates, in layers of cement, layers of women as they are told by Heiman's memory – sick, crazy women, filling up the city of Tel Aviv; women who are lying here too, just one floor up, on the analyst's couch. And men too come to the museum, men who had drowned in sand or watched their loved ones drowning as they stopped a few feet away in order to avoid drowning themselves, staring at them without drawing nearer, without budging. The men and women who come to the museum, who live in flat-platters erected on sand, are watching *Attacks on Linking No. 2* through the video camera placed between the balcony railings, fixed and framed like characters in a Godard movie (Brigitte Bardot seen through a window, by an entrance, framed by the door-frame), watching a man fall, fall and disappear as if the earth had swallowed him. And they make a choking sound of astonishment and horror: he fell down, the cables didn't hold him; the link broke off.

As if the earth had swallowed him. Him, that Palestinian laborer. As if the earth had swallowed them – the car driver watching the streets through an Aviva Uri mask, the figure swallowed by sand, the woman walking who-knows-where, only to disappear again, on Yom Kippur at High Noon. Gone is also the audience that is absent from the lecture/video. The earth had swallowed them all. Presence itself is attacked, the story is attacked (Did the laborer survive? Where would one mourn a person who had drowned in sand? "What does it all mean?"), and another story appears instead, the story of a "report," a psychoanalytic report, a report of battle maps and tank drawings. A report to an academy.

Honored Members of the Academy!

The speaker in Kafka's story "A Report to an Academy" is an ape who, having become assimilated in human society, now gives a short lecture to experts. This ape was captured, confined to a cage, its face pressed against the bars. It couldn't move inside it, it was as trapped and confined

1
 Franz Kafka, "A Report to
 an Academy," *Selected Short
 Stories*, trans. Willa and
 Edwin Muir (New York:
 Schocken Books, 1952),
 pp. 177-191.

as women to their beds, as men to their tanks, as men tied up with ropes. "...Freedom was not what I wanted," he tells, "only a way out; right or left, or in any direction; I made no other demand; even should the way out prove to be an illusion." And his way out was observation: "I watched these men go to and fro, always the same faces, the same movements." And whoever observes and is assimilated into human society by his gaze ends up being swallowed up by the earth. "...That is what I have done, I have fought through the thick of things," says the ape in his report to the Academy, "There was nothing else for me to do, provided always that freedom was not to be my choice."¹

Observation is the way out, and Heiman allows the observant viewer to become one with the event, to assimilate it: his heart drops along with the laborer, his eyes look through the mask along with the artist's, his mouth gapes open like the sand when it swallows someone. And Bion's WWI diary also turns into a container, a tank full of graphic details of battlefields. Heiman's presentation contains them; contains the container.

Observation is the means of saving, linking, taking part, and hand holding; it is also the zone of danger, failure, catastrophe: the catastrophe of gazing at what disappears without one disappearing with it. Observation is the battlefield where words (stories, memories, theories, diaries) are containers, tanks, constantly under attack by images (photographs, memories, drawings). "Oh, words, words," says Heiman in her soft voice, "Oh, high culture. And how does one speak from there? From the darkness? With a mouth full of sand?"; How can one be a witness, when the very act of witnessing is under attack?

How Does One Speak from There?

Heiman's lecture, like her visual works, focuses on giving testimony. According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, a testimony is "a declaration by a witness under oath, as that given before a court or deliberative body." The artist, giving her testimony in the museum-court, is confined to it, swears by it. It is a testimony of double meaning: conveyed in her own words, unkempt, gaping, disturbed words – and yet having the value of an established "reality," or what may be perceived as the truth of reality, inasmuch as the information she imparts complies with the necessary requirements (nearness in time to the oath taking, coherence, witness reliability, and the extent of involvement in the event in question). The lecture makes it quite clear: Heiman is a valid witness.

A testimony is a primary psychoanalytic tool; but at the same time

it is a narrated story, consciously or unconsciously censored, employing means such as character and plot structuring or mechanisms of aesthetic and rhetoric unity. A testimony bridges history, art, and psychoanalysis; it is a bridge that enables these disciplines to judge the reality that lies beyond the text by which it is conveyed. The gap between the testimony and what has (or may have) happened, however, links the testimony to survivors and to them alone; turns witnesses into the lucky ones who, having survived the trauma, are now afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorder. Heiman turns the viewers of her work into a community of witnesses, witnesses of disappearance, of attacks, of containers, and of temporary saving. But the creation of such a community of witnesses entails a moral distortion: the witnesses to the action do not take part in it, thus “disappearing” themselves. That lack of involvement – which is the very reason for Heiman’s attack on linking, for her attack on the reply to her question “What Did You See?” – moderates memory’s visual ambition, imposing on it the frugality of “observation.”

Thus the language of truth is reduced to a jargon, to a lecture, to a common language that enables the survival of the gaze, survival itself. Bion, the psychoanalyst that Heiman contemplates, turns into a metaphor of an impaired survivor, an observing witness who draws, paints, writes to his mother and father about the things he had seen. And like him, whoever sees the body of the man falling off the building (To his death? To his life?), or the woman’s masked face (Who is there, erased behind the mask? Who sees on behalf of whom?), is stricken with the shock of testimony. The gaze of the witness who was saved from a catastrophe comes under attack: “What Did You See?” – that is, “Why did you not do what was needed in order to be there at the time of the catastrophe? Why did you not become a victim of the catastrophe, so that you could tell about it as it was, so that you would not survive it?” – that is, “What Did You See?”.

The affliction demands observation with wide open eyes; without the gaze there is no testimony, no saving, no attacking. The aesthetic shock provoked by Heiman’s testimony about disappearances is not cathartic; it produces an illusion of facing reality, while establishing–photographing reality as a catastrophic anguish. Heiman invites her addressees, who, like all witnesses, were not present at the event but only watch it from afar: “I can imagine that some of you now feel an old... cinematic anguish... I invite you to add it to my own ‘archive of cinematic anguishes.’” One film after another, a photograph, my own memory or another’s, a viewer’s and an exhibitor’s, an analyst’s and an analysand’s: one cannot remain blameless when watching Heiman’s work. Blamelessness or unattackability is not a state of guilt seeking saving or redemption; it is a state of mind, constant wakefulness forever accompanied by shock, shell shock.