

Zusammen.Project

Ongoing project

Layers of a process

Zusammen.Project is an ongoing collaboration between artists Merav Shinn Ben-Alon from Tel Aviv and Janine Gerber from Lübeck, Germany. The two met at an art residency in Latvia, an occasion that also offered something like a roots trip for Merav, which Janine documented. It led Merav to create work that was exhibited in Germany a year later and to meet Janine for the second time. Following a year of correspondence, Janine arrived in Tel Aviv to work in Merav's studio. This exhibition presents the dialogue between their works.

The first part of the project was shown at the K70 Gallery in Lübeck, Germany in the joint exhibition Zusammen/Together in June 2018. The second part of the project, at Minshar Art Gallery, presents a new installation they made comprising Ben-Alon's large drawings on canvas and Gerber's large paper objects.

Zusammen.Project touches on central themes relating to the so-called "third generation": the desire to move ahead without reckoning with the past, but also the need to inquire, learn and understand. The artistic acts in drawing, video and installation, which address current gender issues, is their chosen site for dialogue that touches the wound despite the pain involved.

The project, which began in 2015, is ongoing and will be shown in various places worldwide. Each stage is a new link in the process. Besides exhibitions, the artists have an Instagram account with the handle @ZUSAMMEN.PROJECT where they share works from the process.

Distance, alienation and historical traces drew the Israeli and former east German artists together, to the discovery of overlaps in their artistic practices. Gradually they dared come closer, get acquainted. Both work with paper: Merav's lines separate the figure from its ground, Janine's adhere to the shape of her own body, finding the right, strong lines of a drawing to cut with a cutter or to tear softly with her hands. Merav works in small formats which she enlarges according to their display space. Janine works on a large scale. Quietly and meditatively she concentrates on the paper.

While working on their exhibition at the K70 Gallery, Merav photographed Janine with stop-motion cellphone photography. The outside gaze introduces a performative aspect into Janine's intimate cutting act. Merav strays from her characteristic, fluid drawing. She "borrows" from Janine the concept of the paper as material and introduces it to her world where paper is not heroic, but stationary. She prints the photographs on A4 paper

with a standard printer, and with a cutter “cuts out” Janine’s figure from the prints. She places the cutouts one on top of the other in a layering of varying overlaps.

Suddenly, magic occurs: Layering the cutouts frame by frame produces a 3D image that documents Janine’s performance in a way that recalls Muybridge’s iconic motion photographic series.¹ For both artists the image is the result of performative act, a trace of a gesture. Merav disassembles and reassembles Janine’s figure like an archeologist excavating layers of a wall. Then, without notice, a new aspect appears in the works of both artists: the shadow; affirming the works’ sculptural, the thought processes they involve, the obvious and the unanticipated. The shadows are the site of the magical transference between the two artistic worlds. Janine becomes Merav’s muse. Her figure, with its different cultural DNA, becomes the subject of research in Merav’s drawings.

Awe, respect and desire compel Janine as she approaches the large sheet of paper and stands before it silently with great concentration, assessing its quality, layers, and the emotional baggage it stores. This moment pulls together all her artistic experience, sensitivities and emotions; her awareness, the currents that move her as an artist. All these will gather into the momentum of the knife cutting through the paper when she finds the starting point of her drawing. Many of the drawing precede her final cuts: she recalls her movements like carrying, holding, bending her body – movements she realized more directly thanks to the photos Merav took of her. She remembers her own embodiment during these actions lead her to create outlines of her body which she draws by cuts and tears. There is no place for hesitation, no going back. The paper itself becomes a “body.” The life she reveals in the paper comes to the surface and becomes body – a transition of embodiment.

Merav’s printed cutouts reintroduce materiality into the stop motion photographs of Janine she took with her cellphone. This low-tech practice comes with depths of feelings, sensations and contexts; the accumulation of papers has been described as “mass grave,” the traces of the cuts “remnants.” The 3D image turns the paper into a simple material again, yet it preserves the empty physical and metaphorical hole. An image of a geographic map emerges through the gaping. This is not a real map but a graphic image of a map of the world. The seemingly historically significant reference is revealed as internal chaos.

For Janine, the act of cutting means the act of drawing. For Merav it is a moment of transition, a preparation stage which she photographs and prints a new creating an image that holds traces of the complex act. Potential human violence, specifically

¹ Eadweard Muybridge was the first photographer to photograph the length of a horse’s gallop in as a sequence of motion, proving that at some point all four of its legs are lifted.

related to gender, has appeared in Merav's early works and over the years (her well-known works of cuts and wounds). Like Janine, she also attempts to open screens in her works. The engagement with the presence of the past in the present is to be found in all Merav's works from recent years. Such were her gendered readings of the works of female artists in the 1970s in her 2015 exhibition at Ha'Kibbutz Art Gallery and Basis Gallery a year later. In 2018, she dug into the walls at Ha'Kibbutz Art Gallery to expose the archive of its exhibition history. The collaboration with Janine introduces a new dimension into the dialogue with the past. This is a live intercourse that deals with the present the past is a part of, therefore one that affords room for movement, response and change.

Both treat the line as the backbone of their works: as both medium and work material. Both relate to the conflict and seek to bring it forth. The intersection between them crosses personal identities to become universal.

Carmit Blumensohn, December 2018