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Rupture in the Surface:

Ethics of the Abject

The total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics (Walter Benjamin 1935/6).

Introduction

This quote from Walter Benjamin's 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', written in 1935/6 (Benjamin, 1968a), reflects its historical time – post-World War I and pre-World War II. At that time, modern existence was seen by many to consist of a struggle between three world-historical ideologies: liberalism, communism and fascism. That struggle culminated in WW II and ended with the suppression of the fascist ideology through the destruction of Nazi Germany and its fascist allies.

The two remaining ideologies, liberalism and communism, were divided, geographically and politically, by an iron wall. The organising structure of both ideologies was provided by technology, that framed the social, political and cultural fields (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997). With the collapse of the communist political system, liberalism turned out to be the only hegemonic ideology.

The catastrophic events of 9/11, 2001, constituted an historical turning point at the heart of the triumphant neo-liberal West, and exposed in a dramatic fashion its paradoxes and contradictions. Terror, in all of its manifestations, came to be seen as a rampant menace to personal security. The German modernist composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, made an extraordinarily radical remark on November 16th, 2001, in front of a company of journalists: '*Das ist das größte Kunstwerk, das es überhaupt gibt für den ganzen Kosmos*' ('This is the greatest possible work of art in the entire cosmos') (Hilferty, 2001). Stockhausen was condemned for referring to human death of that magnitude as an artistic performance, but his motivation was the modernist avant-garde desire to erase the agonising borderline between life and art. In other words, through his aestheticisation of the political Stockhausen expressed the avant-garde idea of contextualised art. He envisioned the catastrophe as a total artistic event, a total performance, a true romantic manifestation of art in context.

Stockhausen's statement could find an echo in the discussion of the merits of total performance in Adorno's and Horkheimer's essay on the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997). However, the philosophers regarded live total performance, such as opera, as an unmediated form of art. For them, performance mediated by technological means of distribution devastated the total artistic experience of the audience, and resulted in the production of culture for the non-bourgeois masses. They viewed the proliferation of non-live performances into the private sphere via television as a device for preventing the possibility of thinking. The global screening of the 9/11 events on line fortified Adorno's and Horkheimer's notion of the culture industry, in that it injected into the total non-live performance the dimension of angst inherent in terror acts. The events turned into an uncanny spectacle, incapable of any cultural or artistic interpretation. Yet, vivid traces of the events were burnt into the memories of the spectators.

The lethal spectacle in New York City provided moral justification for the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq and for the encroachment on the rights of Muslim communities in many liberal states across the globe. These acts were legitimated as protective measures against the perpetrators, actual or potential, of terror. However, the unending toll of these pursuits, in massive loss of life, physical destruction, and the pulverisation of human traditions and cultures, has been greater than that of the original attack.

Military activities in the suspected terror habitations disclose a new mode of military intervention, which relies on sophisticated digitised weapons. These weapons mark a phenomenological change in the conceptualisation of the other, metamorphosing its disturbing presence into a mode of visual imagery, thus (re)structuring the terrain of the *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1998a). The imagery produced by digitised weapons is conveyed, as a matter of course, through the digital means of visual distribution, to a
world-wide audience. Thus a convenient division is established between the virtual and the physical which, in turn, provides moral legitimation to 'compassion fatigue', the detachment from responsibility to others. The disturbing moving images on screens function as metaphorical security belts. Streaming in accessible virtuality from beyond the walls, they depict and portray state-of-the-art armed forces manoeuvring, controlling and terrorising heavily populated areas. The repeatedly transmitted visual information restores confidence in the ethics of the military actions as frustrating the dangerous intentions of the alleged perpetrators' culture.

On July 31, 2006, during the second Lebanon war, fifty-seven Lebanese civilians were killed in the village of Kufar Kana by an Israeli aerial bombardment. The Israeli air force's explanation for the so-called 'unfortunate technological mistake' came through a video clip that appeared on millions of television screens. The video depicted semi- abstract images, text, and voice-over, representing humans and photographic technologies in hybrid format. This was not an act of virtual reality, however, nor was it simulation, not even a simulacrum. The performer – the jet pilot – targeted a building in the village of Kana. His deadly action represented the state of contemporary hegemonic warfare, a war conducted against civilian habitats, where destructive acts are named in medical terms, such as surgical operations using the endoscopy procedure.

The visual dramatic scene depicted a duel, a fencing match between high and low technology, ending in a blur. [1] The blur indicated the conclusion, the ending of the drama. The dramatisation of the event by the technological visual apparatus that documented all episodes functioned as a witness employed, in this case, to validate the seeming morality of the act. It called for the (re)affirmation of the conditions on which the death of the villagers was justified, by showing a low-tech truck carrying Katyusha rockets entering and hiding in a residential building after launching its rockets. By screening these images, the hegemonic military power hoped to explain and validate its tragic mistake. Death was then the responsibility of the rival, the Hizbullah, who did not abide by the combat rules of the hegemonic powers.

This digital video clip presented a virtual theatre of machines, projecting images from a sterile zone from which humans - the cause of the drama - were paradoxically excluded. Thus, the disturbing physical bodily presence of the other was turned into a mode of transparency, into an uncanny spectre. Evidently, the absence of human images from military warfare clips displayed in public fulfils the paradoxical objective of dissociating the consequences of war from the apparatus that executes it.

As distinct from virtually displayed military performances, civilian-produced virtual reproductions of events taking place in the disturbed geographical zones do present the human beings involved. Yet, these civilian virtual reproductions can also be blind to the physical bodily dimension of human existence. Thus, the excessively saturated virtual surfaces situated in the non-disturbed habitations function as blindfolds that enable the anaesthetisation of ethical sentiments. This, in turn, results in a state of complacency towards the others, conceived as potential purveyors of terror threats.

Does this signify the end of ethics, then? In this paper I wish to argue that live bodily presence in the controlled zones makes for the critical condition in restoring the ethical sentiment of responsibility, as well as charting a trajectory out of complacency. 'Coming out' of the state of virtuality, being 'there', is a constitutive experience. Interventionist political art, structured and displayed beyond the hegemonic context in the form of performance, documentation, or an art exhibit, can transmit and distribute information from the other side of the walls and geographical prisons, the designated habitats of *homo sacer* controlled by military apparatuses. Moreover, interventionist art has to be embedded in group activity, as opposed to individualist action. [2]

The Checkpoint: Performance of the Real

On the threshold of Western cultural and economic affluence, dwell human beings excluded from its promise. The landscape of the Palestinian West Bank occupied by Israel is dotted with dozens of temporary and permanent checkpoints, chaotic, cumulative piles of concrete, a surface of ruins. Their intervention in the Palestinians' lives is all-pervasive, designed to harass and humiliate them in order to make them relent in their struggle against the occupation. The banality of evil (Arendt, 1965) is all-inclusive, folding and unfolding in the temporality of the fold (Deleuze, 1993), encompassing the ontology of existence

under occupation. Movement within the West Bank is subject to constant interruption, stalled and displaced by the web of checkpoints. State-of-the-art hi-tech gear, weaponry, wireless devices, computers and military uniforms, weave the control system. Each soldier is a communicative intersection in the wireless net. An important item in his or her dress inventory is the bulletproof vest, a shield over the chest signifying a state of active combat, soon to be a wearable wireless intersection site. Telescopic lenses mounted on M-16 rifles are at the soldier's disposal at all times, pointing at those who are at the checkpoints and those who approach the vicinity. Ephemeral bodies move within the checkpoints as if in slow motion, from frame to frame, performing a dance to the tune of the jailer, constantly suspected as either bodily bombs or smugglers of destructive weaponry. [3] Rather than fighting terror, however, this network of checkpoints actually encourages it, in that it turns human beings into helpless objects of oppression, stripped of subjectivity, driven to the point of total despair.

While the digital screen is conventionally thought of as an intersection in the flow of social, cultural and economic transactions, the same screen, interfaced with military technology, metamorphoses into a weapon. A perfect hybridity exists between the body of an Israeli soldier stationed at a West Bank checkpoint, wrapped in fifteen kilos of state-of-the-art defensive and offensive instruments, and interactive digital screens streaming with rich multimedia data on every Palestinian, from birth to death. This hybridity of the physical and the virtual is a key element in the project of pulverising Palestinian society.

Human interaction in the military zone of a checkpoint takes place mostly between the representatives of the occupation - the Israeli soldiers - and the Palestinian inhabitants of the region. It is a disturbed human interaction, a live performance, a displaced, enduring and unpredicted ritual between the *homo sacer*, and its jailer. Children, women, men, healthy or sick, roam through these barriers, between lines sketched by drawn machine guns pointed at them at all times within a breathing distance. The checkpoint is an electronic gate within an imprisoned community of over two million humans.

This system of military barriers is transparent to most Israelis, who live in a terrorised, largely univocal political environment, beleaguered by increasing personal angst and forced into denial by oppressive historical memories of discrimination and persecution. But the 'cruel theatre of life' that is the human dynamic that takes place at the checkpoints is revealed by a group of Israeli human-rights women activists called *MachsomWatch* (Checkpoint Watch). These women try to uncover the banality of evil in the condensed hostile space, at regular time intervals. The Israeli government permits the monitoring of the occupied zones by human-rights activists, who view the routine, ongoing performance, and become an active part of the scene. *MachsomWatch* is a collaborative, non-hierarchical group of women dedicated to monitoring and intervening on behalf of the Palestinians at the checkpoints. A non-homogenous group in terms of age, political convictions and ideological beliefs, it is unified in activist resistance to the occupation and to the checkpoints.

MachsomWatch women reach the checkpoints at the heart of the West Bank at regular and consistent time intervals. Upon completion of a shift, a report appears in the virtual agora of the group, in the form of text, visuals and sound, covering army conduct, harassments, and accounts of 'flying' (mobile) and temporary checkpoints. The activities are voluntary; there are no paid staff and no conditions for joining, beyond resistance to the occupation and gender affiliation. The group's inter-subjective interaction bifurcates into bodily performance at the checkpoints and discourse in the virtual agora.

The object of the occupation regime is to foster uncertainty in the performance of daily mundane activities. It is an environment where a person wakes up in the morning and considers imprisoning herself at home, in order to avoid anguish in the surveyed and harassed occupied space. The women of *MachsomWatch* synchronise emotionally with the plight of the Palestinians. Their repeated bodily encounters at the checkpoints construct what the philosopher Alain Badiou has termed an 'event' (Badiou, 2001): an act in which someone names a void situated at the heart of the apparent fullness of existing reality. The event causes a rupture, after which things can no longer be as they were.

MachsomWatch women nominated the checkpoints, which are the void at the heart of Israel's occupation of the Palestinians. This nomination, in turn, produced a rupture. What could be the response to this rupture? In the case of *MachsomWatch*, they went to the checkpoints to witness the tragic historical consequences of what they believed to be a just cause – the construction of a Jewish homeland. Mentally they felt that they travelled to a totally new terrain. They had a spontaneous urge to tell the story of what they saw, like travellers telling stories of unknown or unvisited territories. They reacted as if they were explorers of a reality no one else in their social vicinity shared. All of that in spite of extensive media coverage and the many documentaries made about the occupation. The women told stories from the far end, which is near, inside Israel's control system, in the geographical zones inhabited by non- citizen Palestinians and by Jewish settlers. Repeated visits to the checkpoints deepened the agonising disturbance of the personal rupture. The vision from the pedestal, witnessing a panoramic lookout, turned into thin fog, while the personal rupture widened. Witnessing was no longer sufficient. They had to 'throw' themselves, intervene and struggle in order to restore the lost human dignity of the Palestinians and of their own.

First the women established contact with the Palestinian detainees in the confined zone of the checkpoint. Then they mobilised the network of different human-rights groups in Israel. Lastly, they opened up venues of communication with the military high command. Witnessing, observing, coupled with real intervention, produced a new identity for the women. Thus, the checkpoint passage, a signifier of temporality, constituted an opening for establishing traverse identities and an option for altering the stage.

Traverse identities disclose the possibility for subversive dynamics to transpire on the hegemony's borders, where subjects are proclaimed to be (or not) legitimate actors on the hegemony's stage. Identities, says Judith Butler, are performances (cf. Butler 1990, p.25). Traverse identities are acting roles in the theatre of the real that can fill a subversive

function, confusing and blurring fixed convictions about the binaries that make up the composite of an identity, such as citizen/non-citizen. This conception of identity empties the overt, obvious perceptions of identity from the boundaries of the interior into the beyond, to the shifting sands. However, the real as performance is conditioned by the performers being part of the hegemony. If performance is synonymous with the real, humanistic political action in the real becomes a performance as well. In this context the ethical is grounded in the real, and bodily presence is a prerequisite for the performance. Could the ethical detach itself from its material boundaries and wander into the virtual?

The means of globalised, virtual technological connectivity generated a discourse rife with modernist critical assertions about the mechanisms of virtual globality. Debates and artworks suggested the possibility of critical analysis via interactive virtual performances or games. In these, the bodily presence was to be substituted by virtual avatars, radically shifting the real to the unreal, to the interactive theatre consisting of multi-virtual sensual dimensions with no bodily interaction. Some of the virtual interactive performances offered critical analyses of the prevailing commercial interactive games, and were named by Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer- Witheford an 'escape option' (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005).

'Out there' the critic is circling in the desert of virtuality, detached from bodily presence. The critical virtual interactive performances disclose a dynamic surface motivated by ethical urgency and good will. But the staging is placed within the interiors of the digital apparatus, the very metaphorical mechanism which is being criticised. Thus, while the interactive virtual performances seemingly aspire to offer a critical analysis with ethical overtones, in actuality they turn into yet another form of technological theatre, a so-called autonomous stage built from, and surrounded by hegemonic iron walls. Furthermore, this seemingly critical action portrays a narration in which Marshal McLuhan's vision of the global village is turning into Borges' infinite cartography (Borges, 1999). A rhizomatic surface, crowded with immeasurably immense information pouring out through screens and wireless devices, igniting mainly the contemporary thinking of so-called Western space.

One of the means for conveying a potential rupture in the solid, complacent virtual surface is to draft the concept of hybridity for the purpose of alternating between Borges' map and what it covers. Donna Haraway, in her 'Cyborg Manifesto', detected major boundary breakdowns occurring in late 20th century, caused by the second technological revolution, the digital revolution (Haraway, 1991). First, between animal and human. Second, between organism and machine, opening up space for the procedure of total textualisation, resulting in undermining and subverting the understanding of what constitutes nature. Third, a breakdown between the physical and non-physical, the virtual. This breakdown, according to Haraway, resulted in the constitution of floating signifiers of unseen networks of power and control. Dichotomies such as nature/culture were obliterated; a reality epitomised by polymorphous simulations emerged.

The ramifications of this facet of reality entail a system of decoding the meaning of the multitude and the I. Virtual connectivity may carve ways for Agamben's 'coming community' by the effect of the 'whatever singularity' (Agamben, 1998b). Furthermore, virtual semiology is a critical factor in restructuring political networks, dismantling the existing ones and potentially regrouping in different ones, as I will show later on.

Returning to the idea of hybridity as flux, as life, this idea can provide a transitional move to a social borderline existence of assimilation, blurring, blending, and dismantling the ubiquitous, moribund ideological dichotomies. The continuous fluctuation of folding/unfolding/refolding of infinite exteriority/ interiority results in event ruptures which may suggest a resort to diasporic survival, marking a diverse 'place' allegedly off the power structures; or in other words, autonomy. Hybridisation can serve as an option to crack the 'matrix of domination' (Haraway, 1986: 155) and open up a terrain for ideas of new social and cultural trajectories. Dominant cultural convictions, like the static notion of the context/object dichotomy, collapse, as context and object are in flowing linkage and can be conceived to become a multitudinal entity. However, as the technological virtual hybridisation enfolds the behavioural principles of the material world, it can be, at the same time, blind to the physical bodily dimension of human existence.

The streaming in-between virtual/material augmentation, calls for a re- assessment of hybridity conceived of as the matrix of citizens/non-citizens. This phenomenon creates a possible plateau for becoming ethical on the threshold of the (in)betweeness of citizen and non-citizen through lines of flight from the walls of the rigid borders of the two brutal binaries; a paradoxical civil being, yet simultaneously a possible dialectical schizophrenic ethical existence. It is there, in the *dasein* (Heidegger, 1953: 255-256) desert of bare life, where feeble traces are etched onto the elusive surface, at the (in)between juncture of exclusion/inclusion, that hybridity constructed from the privileges of hegemonic rights and the effects of bare life exposure constitutes the ethical witness/performer.

 As the sound of pounding drums echoes across the so-called global village, and citizens' rights are put into question by state emergency laws, the gates, barriers and walls are expanding. There, in the habitat of bare life, roams the witness/performer in inhuman sites created by humans. A call to inscribe and perform traces of witnessing comes from emotional synchronisation with the plight of those who are condemned to exclusion, yet are included, like the witness, in one system of control. Synchronisation is conditional on the voluntary exclusion of the witness from the multitude of citizens. Self-exclusionary ethics are a pre-condition for inclusion with those who are excluded by force. The hybrid ethical identity carries a price tag, however. Shaped by the hegemony as the abject (Kristeva, 1982), and viewed as an incomplete civilian entity, amorphous, confusing, the women performers' presence at the checkpoints complies with the categorisation of Israeli society and the military forces in the occupied West Bank. However, the Sisyphean, ardent presence of *MachsomWatch* women stirs tension and confusion within the lower ranks of the military forces assigned to the checkpoints. The confusion stems from the unseen projected citizen/non-citizen hybridity. (In)betweeness is excluded from military codes, and the soldiers therefore cannot recognize the witness/performer position folded in ethical

and political acts. Yet they justify the presence of the women in broad abstract formalistic terms, as a democratic army in a civil society which allows civil activity.

Three groups construct the human interactions on the stage of the checkpoint: the soldiers, the Palestinians, and the women of *MachsomWatch*. The soldiers, blind to the hybrid identities of the women, abject and taint them with heavy stereotypic gendered conceptions, such as stupid, middle-aged women, who harm the security of the Israeli people. Some of the Palestinians comply with the hybrid presence of the women, some appreciate their interventions on their behalf, others view the women as part of the occupation bureaucracy.

At rare times, however, the spontaneous script changes, a rupture appears in the fold and the ethical hybrid position becomes the dominant figure in the play. One winter afternoon in 2005 an American professor joined the group of women at one of the checkpoints in the West bank. The tri-lingual woman spoke English, Arabic and Hebrew fluently. Palestinian movement through the checkpoints is subjugated to changing, arbitrary military rules. On that day the rules changed at midday, so that the ones who passed the checkpoint in the morning could not return to their homes in the afternoon, although their village was only a short distance from the checkpoint. The absurdity of the preventive measure manifested itself in the offer the military made to the Palestinians, that they go to their village via other roads, extending the route several times over and crossing other checkpoints on their way. The linguistic capabilities of the American woman, coupled with her different body language, compared to that of the other women in the group, cracked the surface, and for a short period the ethical hybrid came to light. Soldiers could suddenly realize that the Palestinians were human beings. For a short moment the oppression that lies at the heart of the occupation was seen as an absurdity.

The openness of the checkpoint was inevitably closed. The women continued to exploit all their means in order to aid the victims of occupation: traversed identities between themselves and, on occasion, while sandwiched between drawn guns and the Palestinians, intervened physically to protect the Palestinians from abusive conduct by the soldiers. Props such as bodily gestures, language, and symbolic codes are at the women's disposal in their perseverance to name the void, to show the soldiers that the non-citizen Palestinians are human beings as well. Thus they create a voice of resistance that echoes in the system.

At the checkpoints the women act in small, regular teams. The entire group meets in the virtual agora generated by digital technologies. The agora becomes a stage for storytelling in the form of daily written reports, as well as photographs and videos. It is the place where crucial information regarding the soldiers' moods and attitudes is transmitted. This communal virtual arena is a free show, open not only to the group itself but also to those who exercise surveillance over it and to the media. Thus the virtual agora echoes Plato's cave. The stories are being told to the inhabitants of the cave, who gaze at the shadows on the wall, flamed by state ideology.

The inhabitants do not listen to the storytellers; the storytellers are unable even to change the source of light, as the projector beams blind visions in the dark pavilion. Yet, the women of *MachsomWatch* will toil and continue the show in and outside the cave, transgressing the locals.

The virtual agora revives the storytelling genre. The storyteller unfolds and shares experiences with the others (Benjamin, 1968b). Stories are usually told as is, with no interpretation, injecting a mode of objectivity, endowing the story with reliability stripped of personal inclinations. The reports posted on the internet by the women share this quality. However, deconstruction of the reports might reveal the subtle political stands of the different storytellers.

The Recital

Visam Thiem, a Palestinian music student, performed a very short violin recital in front of an Israeli officer, while the latter was inspecting his identification papers at Beit Iba checkpoint. [4] While Visam was advancing and receding his bow, trying to produce some musical notes, men behind him were squashed between the electronic revolving gate and the soldiers in front of them. Two and a half meters from Visam's performance the blindfolded face of a solitary incarcerated young Palestinian was visible through the rusty bars of the tiny cell. An open shack adjacent to the prison cell was crammed with suspected Palestinian men, whose identification papers did not satisfy the expectations of the soldiers.

The short violin tones were swallowed by the tense sweaty commotion of misery. At times a restless bustle hum echoed in the condensed air, a disturbing resonance voiced by a mass of human beings pressed against the revolving metal gate, begging to speed up the checking procedure. The gates are activated electronically by the soldier on the shift, standing at a distance. And the violinist made his way through the revolving metal gate on that hot afternoon. He knew he could not fulfil his desire that week. The soldiers had orders forbidding young men under the age of forty from moving westward beyond that checkpoint. And Visam was only twenty-eight. As his turn came to be checked, he approached the checking point, desperately desiring to go to his violin tutor in a small village on the nearby mountain, just three kilometres ahead.

Violin player at Beit Iba checkpoint. Photo courtesy of the author.

At that juncture, a group of four MachsomWatch women positioned themselves in the vicinity of the barrier. Uneasiness, repulsion and a deep sense of solidarity with suffering human beings overwhelmed the women. Through eye contact they merged with detainees in the shack. Each woman kept her displaced historical associations to herself. Their personal subjectivity came to light within the horrendous interface through their interactions with the Palestinians and the soldiers. The videograph of the violin player was an artwork produced in an arbitrary moment, a sliced fragment of life taken from the flux of people strained at the checkpoint. That moment proved to be a constitutive event. Two weeks after I posted the videograph on my site, it was picked up by an Israeli newspaper, not before checking its authenticity with the military spokesperson, and was immediately reproduced internationally. It generated a flurry of debate in the media, which started in Israel and was aired on talk shows and dozens of blogs in Israel and across the globe. The attention of the media lasted, in various forms, for almost a month, an unusual phenomenon.

What made an image taken from a very short videograph of a Palestinian playing the violin in front of an Israeli officer, in a space controlled by the military, a work of multi-signifiers? The visual inscribed traces on a surface densely filled with historically displaced memories. The images brought an interval of reflection to most Israelis, an almost sublime moment, when the fold was fractured, and could not refold. The victims of persecution and discrimination crossed a threshold, the Borgesian map was torn apart to reveal the surface

of the iron wall, that of a victim becoming victimiser; an unacceptable, forbidden, mental state, which echoed of ultimate immorality and vice. The image sabotaged symbolic structures planted in the collective Israeli cultural memory, those structures that constructed the new Jew, the Zionist, the Nietzschean Ubermentsch, the one that underwent a metaphorical transformation from the last Jew, the Diasporic, the weak, the nomadic, the wanderer, void of patriotic and national and territorial feelings. It was a terrifying moment of realisation that the semiotic displacement of the figure of the fiddler visualised and symbolised, in the contemporary historical junction, the landscapes of the new victims of political repression. These landscapes are not exclusive anymore. The Palestinians are now the inhabitants of these semiotic territories. Inserting the Palestinian fiddler in a virtual surface made it clear that there are no empty territories in the Promised Land. And yes, victim can become victimiser.

Conclusion

My key argument in this paper has been that ethical-political performative action is still possible, but that it requires the physical placing of the performer's body in the controlled zone, in the territory where the *homo sacer* lives. The advent of the digital technology of the seen employed by neo-liberalism cultivates the soil for a convenient arrangement - that of removing those living in the troubled habitats from the conscience of proclaimed liberal morality. A sharp dichotomy streams forth from the virtual screens: on the one hand, the representation of Western life, and on the other, representation of the troubled zones. The binary projections proliferating on screens are crucial for the generation of complacency. The omnipresent screens deepen angst in the public and private spaces through visuals streaming from the troubled zones that fortify and legitimise the process of social pulverisation and individual death. Human- rights organizations present in the troubled zones aid, maintain and monitor *bare life* existence. However, these very humanistic activities also help in deepening Western complacency (cf. Badiou, 1998).

Since the trouble zones are mostly military-controlled, the placement of the body cannot be an individual act. It must be the act of a group possessing the clout, the resources, and the perseverance required for this difficult and sometimes dangerous performance. These conditions establish the context for the performance of activist art in the controlled zones, in that the artist must operate in linkage with human rights groups present in the area. The ethics of activist art are different from those of the human-rights groups, however, and go beyond the conventional liberal code of ethics.

My argument is based on the experience of my own linkage with *MachsomWatch*, a group of Israeli women who actively monitor the checkpoints placed by the Israeli military throughout the West Bank in order to control the movement of Palestinians in their own habitat. This human- rights group practices the liberal code of ethics by intervening on behalf of the Palestinians at the checkpoints in situations overflowing with excess control. By exploiting their abject hybrid identity (identity = performance) as both citizens and non-citizens of the occupying power, the women, in Alan Badiou's terms, name the void at the heart of Israeli collective consciousness.

My visual work, the *Violin Player*, taken in that context, reflects my understanding of the ethics of the performer activist, in contrast to the liberal ethics of the human-rights group. While the visual brought to light the truth of the occupation, it at the same time sabotaged the frail collaboration that exists between the human-rights group and the military apparatus. Intervention on behalf of the Palestinians necessitates collaborative procedures with the representatives of the occupation, the IDF (Israel Defence Forces), of all ranks. Through historical displacement, the visual foregrounded the problematic relationship between these two seemingly conflicting organs, and disturbed, if for a moment, the complacency of the Israeli public.

Activist artists linked to human-rights groups can facilitate ethical performance by being the performers, as well as the directors, and by directing spontaneous interference in the routine of controlled areas. They can do this by highlighting the paradoxes and contradictions encompassed in the activity of both the oppressing powers and the human-rights groups that seek to make the oppression more bearable, especially for the liberal public at home. To achieve this goal, activist artists have at their disposal their artistic creativity and knowledge, and the digital means of producing and distributing art. They can utilise these tools to create antithetical effects to the projections conventionally proliferating on screens in order to generate both fear and moral numbness in the hegemonic societies.

Notes

1. Figure 1: Screenvideo from Israeli Television Channel 1. Available at: http://www.horit.com/kana.html

2. Interventionist work of art could qualify as performance art due to its site-specific qualities.

3. Figure 2: Horit Herman Peled. 'Fence', (2005). Available at: http://www.horit.com/fence4.html

4. Figure 3: Still from the Videograph the *Violin player*, Videographer: Horit Herman Peled. Available at: http://www.horit.com/violin.htm

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Editorial Note