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Chen Cohen's Practicing Art as a Living Inquiry

Text by Yaakov Israel

Chen Cohen | Video, Photographs & Organic Materials and Substances

Entering the Bezalel M.F.A students' studio floor, partly transformed into a gallery space presenting Cohen's graduation exhibition, the viewers find themselves standing in front of a large-scale video projection, depicting a frontal view of the artist, sitting on her knees, naked, flanked on each side by a big dog, and a large black and white photograph of two dogs is used as a background for the video. The dogs sit upright, facing each other, their heads stretched gazing into the sky, ancient pillars guarding the entrance to a dangerous domain. The whole scene is static, broken only by the movement of the dogs.¹

Cohen's two-room personal space exhibits minimalistic, grainy, black and white manipulated photographs depicting two rifles, a horse with no head, an image documenting a body-act performed by the artist and an image of Cohen with an infusion bag connected to her arm, standing together with her sister in a hospital ward. The images are printed in various sizes, some framed, some pasted directly onto the imperfectly painted white walls, accompanied by a basic, medium-sized flowerpot containing a very long, artificially elongated cactus, its stem nearly reaching the ceiling. An opening in the wall leads to the second room, which contains a stainless-steel trolley upon which she placed an old plastic bottle containing a yellowish substance, a large-scale vertical collage, covering the right-hand side of the wall from ceiling to floor, and a small print facing it on the opposite wall.

Cohen's work is based on establishing rituals structured around the physical appropriation of the studio space in a way that visualizes and conceptualizes it as a physical part of her body. Her working methods shift between different media and

¹ The video runs in loops, each 11:40 minutes long, and was projected on a 3x5.20 meters sized wall.

senses interconnecting life and art, and merging naturally into her oeuvre. The unavoidable starkness of the space confronts the viewers, accompanying them throughout the show, lingering, like the reminiscence of a bad aftertaste, a heavy feeling, triggered by the narratives the imagery and sensory perception imply, a feeling that artmaking and the studio space serve as a platform, through which Cohen channels her feelings and thoughts, connections and fears, remnants embedded in déjà-vu images that live on, at the core of her being, channeling and connecting to life itself.

“Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you? Nothing strikes you. You don't know how to see.”² Cohen’s work introduces new modes of perception and interpretation. The eyes move around the space, looking at the exhibition as a whole, looking at the exhibition as fragments, deconstructing the show and viewing the works as video, as photographs, as installation and as documents, as images, as abstractions, as reflections of the mind and perception of the senses. The whole body becomes alert, using one’s whole being as an eye. The body finds itself one step ahead of the mind, each sense enabling a different understanding of the work.

Sight and Seeing

“We think of our eyes as wise seers, but all the eye does is gather light. Let’s consider the light-harvesting. As we know, the eye works a lot like a camera; or rather, we invented cameras that work like our eyes.”³ (Ackerman, 1995)

Sight is probably the first sense the viewer uses entering any exhibition, but in this case the shift between looking and seeing are the core modes for understanding the process and the work. The act of seeing, as Ackerman points out, is naturally attributed to the eyes,⁴ but, like the camera, all they really do is collect visual information which is processed by the mind and the emotions. The discipline of seeing, collecting and archiving images is an important part of Cohen’s working practice. Her eyes are always

² See Perec, Georges. 2008. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Translated by John Sturrock. London: Penguin Classics. p.50

³ Ackerman, Diane. 1995. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Vintage Books. p.419. p.232

⁴ Ibid.

at work, looking at the world as she moves through it on her daily activities, gathering information for future use. The camera as a tool for collecting moments usurps the act of seeing, in a way that suggests that without the photograph the moment may not have happened, or in Sontag's words, as "[a] way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image".⁵ Sontag's words were written to explain the way photography functions in tourism but they seem also appropriate to describe Cohen's practice. Cohen communicates how the act of photography separates her from experiencing the world. This is probably why she gave up the camera as a tool that captures life as it unfolds and adopted a more detached technical approach to photography.

Cohen's obsessive collecting of mental and photographic images demonstrates the understanding that seeing the image is just the beginning of a process of understanding it. This archive of ghost images, mental or photographic, is a starting point for all her future work. The act of seeing and the many ways photography appropriates this traces back to her early formative years as a photography student: "As a photography student, I never managed to perfect my technique, but the essence of the medium is embedded in me, I see moving frames. I'm much more attentive since I studied photography."⁶

When looking at the work, the viewer encounters the artwork as representation, and tries to understand its meaning by comparing it to what s/he knows of the world. This act can be thought of as connecting fragments, each needed to create a fuller understanding of the whole. But what does one see? A horse with no head and two singular images showing two different types of rifles, rendered and presented as objects in an unobtrusive background; a snapshot depicting a moment in Cohen's life, the photographic act automatically showing it as a memorable and important occasion; images capturing body gestures done as part of a performative act, which transmits the realism and credibility of a document, yet their presence also points to absence, an absence sometimes all too obvious and sometimes subtle. The horse has no head; the

⁵ Sontag, Susan. 1978. *On Photography*. 4th. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. p.9.

⁶ Cohen, Chen, interview by Yaakov Israel. 2017. *Phone Call* (08 02).

guns have no triggers; the snapshot commonly used to render happy moments shows Cohen's sister visiting her in hospital; the photographs documenting performance depict moments that seemingly have no meaning. What connects the three types of images are the way each deconstructs the idea that the representation of reality is connected to sight.

In Cohen's practice, the image deals with defining and re-articulating the photographic process, firstly by liberating her from the dependency on the camera as a main tool for creating photographs, and, secondly, by separating sight from the photographic act and re-appropriating the act of seeing as a way of experiencing life. It is an act that echoes Berger's understanding that "[i]t is seeing that establishes our place in the surrounding world".⁷ For Cohen, making art is a way of connecting herself to the living.⁸ Image-making and photography function as a connection or a line between herself and the world, allowing her to travel back and forth between the medium and the real world.

Touch | Losing Touch

"The first sense to ignite, touch is often the last to burn out: long after our eyes betray us, our hands remain faithful to the world... in describing such final departures, we often talk of losing touch."⁹
(Sachs in Ackerman, 1995)

Touch is not the primary sense one thinks when experiencing works of art. In most exhibitions, touching is strictly forbidden unless explicitly specified. In this, Cohen's artwork is not different. None of the pieces invite the viewer to touch. If anything, they generate distance between the viewer and the work: the tall cactus with its endless thorns, the stainless-steel trolley transmitting a cold, sanitized hospital feeling, and the

⁷ Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books. p.7.

⁸ Cohen, Chen, interview by Yaakov Israel. 2017. *Phone Call* (08 02).

⁹ Frederick Sachs in Ackerman, Diane. 1995. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Vintage Books. p.71.

plastic bottle containing an unidentifiable yellowish substance which transmits a nauseating feel.

The photographs, which vary in the approach, also define different viewing distances. The two large framed photographs of rifles hanging close to each other as a diptych reflect the soft midday light entering the room from the two curtained windows on the opposite wall, force the viewer to move left and right in the attempt to view both works simultaneously. The partly fractured glass of the left frame also keeps the viewer at bay. The big unframed photograph of the horse with no head on a white background creates an uncanny feeling, as the interpretation of the image shifts back and forth between representation and object. The two photographs showing performance act as testimony of a temporary act that is no more. The last image, a snapshot taken in the hospital, shows a moment most would not want to remember, the clinical environment and its size on the wall keeps the viewer at a safe distance.

The awareness of the distance, between the object and the world, between the artist and the object, and finally between the viewer and the artwork is a key element in understanding art as a means of establishing contact with the world, or, more accurately, keeping the artist from losing touch.

Synesthesia, Sound and Smell

“John Cage once emerged from a soundproof room to declare that there was no such state as silence. Even if we don’t hear the outside world, we hear the rustling, throbbing, whooshing of our bodies, as well as incidental buzzings, ringings, and squeakings.”¹⁰ (Ackerman, 1995).

The other senses come into play once the viewer’s perception becomes active through cultural associations and personal interpretations. The white walls and black and white images create a monochromatic atmosphere which creates a feeling of silence. While experiencing the silence, a sense of heaviness echoes from the artwork, dominating the gallery space, reflecting Cage’s realization that there is no such thing as a soundless space.

¹⁰ John Cage in Ackerman, Diane. 1995. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Vintage Books. p.191.

The silent heaviness and the distance between the viewer and the work stress the function and significance of making art in Cohen's life. She believes that one's physical and mental capabilities are embedded in art. Chronic pain has been part of her life from a very young age, as were the many tests she underwent in hospitals. During that time, she developed a fear of disease and of death. Lately, she was the victim of a car accident. The driver stated that he did not see her, a fact which made her question her physical being and existence. In the course of her recovery she was confined to her apartment and couldn't venture into the world. To pass the time, she started listening to morning radio programs, which became a way to stay sane and helped her to re-connect with the world: "In these morning talk-shows they change topics so abruptly, the presenter could be talking about a horrible accident and then talk about something funny, these kinds of shifts happen also in reality, they became a reflection of reality."¹¹

Smell, also perceived as elemental and secondary, becomes part of experiencing the work. Once again, the viewer reflects on a sense that is not usually primary in this context. Seeing creates associations, and associations generate a memory of smell. The visual mode often elicits imagined perception through other senses. Merleau-Ponty argued that in a work of art "[w]e see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their odor."¹² A claim that seems natural in this show.

Earlier in this text I described the distancing that the artwork establishes between itself and the viewer by pointing out the visual connotations that arise from certain objects. However, these connotations are not only visual but also olfactory. Bodies have a physical memory which associates a particular smell to a certain situation, person or object. Looking at the stainless-steel trolley, one is immediately confronted with the visual connection to the hospital environment and the antiseptic smell that's unavoidably connected to it. The same happens with the bottle containing the yellowish green substance which is immediately understood as some kind of bodily fluid. The moment we understand the visual, we automatically start smelling urine and vomit. The awakened sense of smell interconnects with the silent heaviness lingering over the

¹¹ Cohen, Chen, interview by Yaakov Israel. 2017. *Phone Call* (08 02).

¹² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, trans. H. L. and T. A. Dreyfus. *Sense and Non-Sense*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964. P. 267

space, suggesting the ominous and morbid sensation often felt in spaces where bodily rituals were performed.

Conclusion: Re-Framing, Perception, a New Vocabulary

In the same way, what is political in art is not in the fact that art gives valuable messages about the state of the world or represents any of the social or ethnical identities, but that it constructs some communities of sense, I mean some relations of the visible and what can be said about the visible – some kind of reframing – of space and time, which define new ways of being together or being apart, being in front of or in the middle of, inside or outside, etcetera [...]. [T]here is always an esthetics of politics and a politics of esthetics.¹³ (Rancière, 2005)

Conscious and subconscious merge, defining the way Cohen articulates her life and working methods to herself and to the world through her work. She consciously creates repetitive rhythms by transforming everything into rituals and ritual spaces. She keeps a clear separation between home and studio: home is for living, and the studio is the place for the performative actions through which she investigating disease and death. In the process, Cohen started thinking of the studio as an added organ,¹⁴ a way of probing life and death.

The inseparable connection between Cohen and the studio is evident in the decision to transform it into a gallery space for her exhibition. This physical connection is also evident in the way she thinks of the development of her artwork as part of the studio space, so much so that she could not envision installing her work anywhere else. To stay true to the process and the work, she separated herself from her peers, whose work was installed in the main building, and transformed her studio into an exhibition space.

Cohen's artwork is not of the kind that easily presents itself. It demands time and effort to be understood. Even more, a thoughtful viewer may find s/he took the role of a detective, attempting to connect the dots. It's not that the fragments do not connect to a whole, it's not that the work is incoherent. The exhibition is very much one piece. Still, viewers are confronted with the fact that they need to develop a new set of visual

¹³ Rancière, Jacques, interview by Brian Dillon. 2005. "If Art is Political, What is its Constituency?" *Frieze Talks*. Frieze.com. London. October.

¹⁴ Cohen, Chen, interview by Yaakov Israel. 2017. *Phone Call* (08 02).

vocabulary, a vocabulary that can help articulate their response to a different kind of artistic work, that occupies a specific performative space that shifts between photography, video and objects as visual representations, a testimony of performative acts that are defined by her body. “Good art teaches something to the body, not to the rational”.¹⁵

The physical connection between Cohen and the space is evident in the installation. Through the act of placing the works in the two-room studio/gallery, Cohen intuitively divided it in a way that relates to theories about the way the left and right parts of the human brain function: the right part of the brain is believed to be creative and emotional, while the left is rational and objective. She has done so by hanging in the right-hand room works in which she transformed everyday objects through her imagination, and in the left the ones that function as signs or symbols. The exhibition is thus divided according to Pinchas Noy’s claim. The means of representation develop simultaneously in two directions: maximalism, in which our representations slowly become fuller and richer until they fully describe the object, and the minimalistic, which narrows down representations until one small sign can encompass a large amount of information and meaning. Maximalism could be described as the development of the imagination and minimalism as the process of developing signs and language.¹⁶ By dividing the space in this manner Cohen is re-framing the visible by experimenting with new ways of conceiving of artmaking as living inquiry, and, as such, her art could be described as an effort to articulate a new political vocabulary, one that connects Life | Home | Work, and Artwork.

¹⁵ Quote by Artist Boaz Arad from a lecture about curating, teaching and art making, Colloquium no. 14, the Master in Policy & Theory of the Arts program, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem.

¹⁶ Noy, Pinchas. 1999. *Psychoanalysis of Art and Creativity*. Tel-Aviv: Modan Publishing House ltd. p.269. (Hebrew)

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