

## Eyes Wide Shut

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In 1995 Masha Yozefpolsky exhibited in the Tel Aviv Kidmat Eden Gallery a video film entitled "Soon," in which she presented a long-drawn-out attempt to fall asleep. In the realm of fleeting thoughts, in the twilight zone between wakefulness and sleep, or – if you will – between life and death - hallucinatory images in words and pictures appear, fraught with the vacuum of the beyond, clinging to and yearning for it. "To be on the borderline, on the threshold of dreaming [...], a fading existence shifting toward a void," the artist wrote about her work, "April 1964" (the date of her birth in Leningrad), a work that was exhibited in the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art in 2004. Seven years later, in 2011, she re-clarifies: "In the past three years the mirror is dim and devoid of reflection. It is not the Buddhist emptiness, nor is it Becket's "no one" in *Waiting for Godot*, but rather a vague void, arbitrary and flooded at the same time. Nothing is connected to anything".

Thus, between 1995 and 2011, over a 16-year period of intensive work, Masha Yozefpolsky never ceased to evoke the void from which the ghosts of her work emerge. This artist, one of the most profound, unique and fascinating in the video medium, has elevated the language, rendering it pure poetry, the poetry of the video. Her visual-verbal poetry repeatedly seeks the hallucinatory, treading on the borderline between here and there, on the threshold of the above and beyond. This is an extremely enigmatic kind of video poetry, charged with nightmarish and morbid existential feelings, haunted by danger and terror. Her space is that of the dream, which slips away from the lucid and coherent, and refuses discursive interpretation. Her work abounds in enigma and mystery, discontinuity, fragmentality; she shatters being into smithereens or fades it into shades of white in order to validate a place that is not a place, which is the artist's real un-place. This is profoundly strong and gripping work, in its depths a wound that refuses to heal: in her 1998 "North Cut," (Kibbutz Gallery, Tel Aviv) Yozefpolsky included a video which describes licking glass "like an animal trying to heal itself or clean a wound," she wrote. A broken glass panel was positioned on the floor, and upon it she screened images of Nordic landscapes and dream texts such as "slowly crashing, wants to sleep, she drowned, vomits into his mouth, there is a burned forest, a black sun, the fish in the sea are all gone," etc.

The overwhelming beauty of Yozefpolsky's installations and video films is indebted to the dream space, and moreover – to the infinite shadow of death into which she has submerged. Sublime beauty, rich in baroque sensuality, characterizes many of her works: look at the dozen diners sitting around a table laden with deserts (the sweetness of the end...) in "-273° / Deep Freeze" (Bat Yam Museum, 2008), or the glory of the hundreds of chopped-off tails of the salmon who were placed, a year earlier, on two platforms within the video installation space of "Valeriana," in the Tel Aviv Artists House.

Pictures from a dream. "Want to sleep," we hear in the fragmented sentences in "North Cut," as well as "Wait quietly," or "White pages," or "Through the

mist," or "Transparent corridor," etc. – images of the fading and disappearing being. "The mirage of psycho-physical geography," is how Yozefpolsky defines her work; in the context of another of her works ("Noli Me Tangere," Interdisciplinary Art Arena, Jerusalem, 2008) she added: "We have been hypnotized into a psycho-physical zombie state of being." Little wonder that in "Hold On" (The Jerusalem Artists House, 1996) a single monitor responded to a semi-circle of six monitors positioned on the floor, screening white and transmitting a recording of dream stories in several languages. The act of whitening consciousness, making it obscure and transparent – constitutes sleep promoters in Yozefpolsky's borderline works. In "Vector Still" (Camera Obscura, Tel Aviv, 1999) she screened the documentation of her sleep brainwaves recorded in a sleep research laboratory. In "Valeriana" she called for – by name and through images – Valerian – a tranquilizer and sleeping tincture. In the work mentioned above, "Soon," the word 'Lithium' appears, an even stronger sleeping potion. In the same work ("... dream space... to escape the cultural borderlines with no direction..."), flashes of words and unconscious images accompany a woman who is trying to fall asleep in her bed. Accordingly, the artist's closed eyes are a repeating image in her work, and they are what connects her to the symbolist (see the closed eyes of the woman in the painting of Odilon Redon) and surrealist traditions (see the group photographs of the French surrealist poets with their closed eyes). Closing one's eyes is a precondition for moving away from a rational and logical interpretation: "Representations that elude tracking, governed certainty and an overdose of blinding speech," wrote Yozefpolsky about the double-video "Extract" (Królikarnia Museum, Warsaw, 2006) – two video films screened opposite one another, populated by dream figures of fish heads on a bed of salt, their lifeless eyes focusing on a central plate. Closing one's eyes to being, and awareness in their opening to the non-conscious. In "Interval" (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2000) the words of the video seek to hypnotize the spectators and put them sleep: "When you are told that you will not be able to open your eyes – you will not open them..." In "I am you," The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2002 – the face of a woman with closed eyes is lit up by a white and blurring reflection that broadens the body. In "Valeriana" installation Yozefpolsky combined a film that shows her with eyes closed trying to resuscitate the head of a dead salmon. "Deadfishswiminsidethemouth," wrote Hila Lulu Lin, another Israeli video artist, in the 1990s, and Masha Yozefpolsky finds her own voice and the reverberation of her otherness in the silence of the slaughtered fish. Fish, blindness and erasure of the gaze govern the rituals of "Noli Me Tangere" a ritual work in which the fishes' eyes are pierced and in which family photos are erased by dipping them in water (similar to in a "dark room"...). "Blindness as a sentence and curse undergoes transformation and is revealed as a gift," wrote the artist. Blindness of the eye and consciousness, and silence, the silence of the fish connect it to the expressive mute language of the woman in white (nylon sleeves inflated with air) in "The Code" (the Jerusalem Film Festival, 2004). This silence is also linked to the gesture of silence of the woman in "Lontana" (Hazira Interdisciplinary Art Arena, Jerusalem, 2009).

Alongside the closed eyes, self-vertigo is also a means for reaching out toward the beyond (it was Antonin Artaud who was captivated by the

vertiginous trance of Bali dances). In "Towards" (Hazira Interdisciplinary Art Arena, Jerusalem, 2001) a woman is dancing, revolving around herself while fleeing (in fancy dress) in a dark space. In the video installation "Valeriana" – a "dervish", revolving slow movement, making the world of the artist, dressed in scales – a vaguely clownish, vaguely priestly attire - vertiginous ("you are a constant movement of roaming over changing and fading routes").

In these moves toward negating the concrete, the body is negated, experience is negated, and the gates to death open wide. Masha Yozefpolsky defined her work, "Heal the Healer" (Kalisher Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2004) as an "act of deletion"; she screened the movement of white fabric which was possibly clothing, perhaps a shroud. "A missing body in movement," she added. That same year she created "Anima," (Art Focus, No. 4, Museum of the Underground Prisoners, Jerusalem); on the floor of the hall she screened the white dress of a child, a dress that floated/drifted above and under water, in effect – the ghost of a dead little girl that for a moment also seemed to be a drifting angel. An absent body and the memory of dead Ophelia. In "Aura" (2006) – a nun in white goes over to a disabled person as a ghost, helps him up on his feet in a miraculous act and slowly moves the empty wheel chair along a dark corridor. An ascetic non-body encountering the absent physicality of the disabled person and the absence of the person sitting on the empty chair.

Negation of the body also means removal of the skin: in "April 1964" the camera focuses on a woman shedding skin (latex) from her face. The words "Shed your skin" also appear in "Hold On." Shedding skin means rebirth, renewal; however, in Yozefpolsky's world birth is possible only through death, by negating the false mask of existence.

Yozefpolsky increasingly dances with death, courts it, makes love to it. When she entitles her 2008 double video "-273° / Deep Freeze" she refers to the temperature at which the body freezes (before its future revival). In "Mission" (Cinematheque Tel Aviv, 1996) she tears open a loaf of bread lengthwise as one who tears open the body of a fish and pulls out its entrails (which will be later returned to the "skin" – bread; this too is a kind of revival).[1] Death, with which the artist develops a relationship, is a dangerous and violent space which grants her work the character of "the theater of brutality," which we associate with Artaud, Georges Bataille and Jean Genet.[2] "Evaporate lips, freeze braid, suck scars, chew liver, cut lungs, scatter ribs, cook spinal cord, grind ears, peel eyes, lick brain, crush fingernails, fry skin, bite veins," - Yozefpolsky screens her orders like a cannibal, against the background of a picture of a man and woman in a passionate embrace ("Error Lips" - Interdisciplinary Art Arena, Jerusalem, 2002). The duality of the sex drive and the death drive, which appears in the majority of Yozefpolsky's work, has been fused, rendering a single morbid eroticism.

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The connection between bread and the female body stems from Jewish sources (see, for example, [1] Rashi's commentary on the story of Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar) and from Israeli work (such as the 1973 work of Efrat Nathan, and the 2005 photographs of Orit Raf).

When reality, being, and life are sentenced to brutal slaughter, little wonder that the place – the real place of the artist – is shattered into smithereens (like the glass shards that the artist clutches, and through which she is reflected in “Elsewhere” [the Museum Forum, 1998-1999]) and is converted into a non-place. The real place which sentences those living in it (and those who visit it – we, the spectators) to disorientation and devastation. In the video installation “Interval” we read: “Devoid of any sense of orientation a person walks along the net-streets of the pragmatic world. A pool of images and meanings of an infiltrating reality penetrate the dream space.” The shattered reality is also that of the multilingual fragmented nursery songs, broken pieces and a medley of languages reminiscent of the Tower of Babel. In “Code” (2004) different languages can be heard – Russian, Arabic, French, Italian, Hebrew – verbalizing texts by Jean Genet, Guy Debord and the International.

Disorientation is the governing rule in this dystopian space –existential and the capitalistic – of terror and catastrophe, which address utopias such as the Communist Revolution.

The artist must escape from this place. “Lead me to the northern exit of the city,” she asks-demands in the recording of the 1999 “Vector Still”: rectangular white boxes are placed on a bed of salt; a cold neon light gleams from their sides, and fragments from inside – abstract drawings – are screened. In the background, intermingled texts in different languages, while the work seeks to avoid and prevent any consistent interpretation, thus leaving it in a state of chaos and loss of direction. “Where would you like to be?” is the question that appears in “North Cut,” and the recorded intermingled responses are heard through partially blocked loud speakers. The images of “other”, faraway, exotic places complete this experience of a no-place, in the center of which stands a large totem made of soap bars, emitting a strong odor of sterile cleanliness, a no-place in itself. In “April 1964” the voices of the poetic texts alternate between Russian and Hebrew: “Urgency, disorientation, violent and vulnerable poetics,” as the artist described it. The texts are indeed nightmarish: “...dead soldiers, children are kidnapped at the city’s intersections, swans in a black lake...” In “Hold On” – the fragmented images of a woman in different locations are integrated into mixed-up dream stories: “...I see them moving away in the field/voices disperse/penetrating reality/you say/remove the skin/doomed/to wander/on the edge...” Here the six floor monitors confirm non-unified dispersal: “Every video film indicates a possible escape exit,” wrote Yozefpolsky, who wanders on the edge.

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On the connection between the work of Yosefpolsky and Bataille see Naomi Aviv’s illuminating article, “Valeriana or a sphinx without an enigma,” the “Valeriana” exhibition catalogue, Tel Aviv Artists House, 2007.

These wondrous/terrifying works, that seek that which is beyond us and envelops itself with it, cannot be comprehended by categories of consciousness. These are works that obliterate the capacities of analysis and synthesis and draw us to “the negative sublime,” that endless inferno, for which the German Romanticists so yearned. Yozefpolsky’s works sentence us to “regulations of hunger” (in the words of the artist) – “Cognitive hunger regarding what is happening,” as she says. “Lontano”, sings the Italian singer, a syrupy song in the style of the San Remo festivals, while our eyes gaze at a dark winter scene of a city along whose streets a group of young and old people are faltering (on their arms - a white armband of the exiled), who move in an Angst dance, like convicts on their last walk. “The inferno is here”.