URIEL ORLOW

ANDREA THAL

An Exchange on Notions of Haunting

ANDREA THAL In view of your exhibition in Biel I would like to suggest that we start this conversation by looking at possible intersections that might appear when several of your works come together in one place. *Time is a Place* brings together works that address very different contexts. One of the focuses of the exhibition is a series of installation works – among them the different elements you have exhibited in variable combinations under the title *The Short and the Long of It* – shedding light on historic events related to the Suez Canal. It researches the fate of a flotilla of international cargo ships trapped in the canal for eight years following the outbreak of the so-called Six-Day War and the story behind an empty plinth standing at the northern entrance to the canal in Port Said. Another large complex of works is made up of *Remnants of the Future* and *Plans for the Past*, two films and a series of photographs, drawings and other material that trace the history of the ghost town Mush. This large-scale, unfinished housing project, planned in Armenia at the end of the Soviet era to house people who became homeless due to the 1988 Spitak earthquake, connects to another city with the same name in Turkey that was the site of a massacre in the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

While these brief descriptions of the respective contents fall short of an attempt to draw together the many side lines and complexities of the individual works, they might help to highlight some parallels in the different bodies of works present in the exhibition. One common aspect is their subtle attention to the traumatic and haunted daily life following situations of war and catastrophes. Drawing this comparison makes me think of "the blind spots of history", a term you frequently use when speaking about the historic references in your work. In this context, the "blind spot" might not only refer to the lesser known and maybe forgotten events in history but also to the everyday experience of living in the shadow of such events, living with and in them long after the headlines have turned to other, more "current" news. I feel this inherently complex temporal and spatial perspective is mirrored in the installation of the work that often consists of numerous parts and various media arranged in different constellations from one exhibition to another, thus creating a sideways and parallel notion of narrative and temporality.

URIEL ORLOW Yes, the notion of the blind spot refers as much to the current conditions of the projects' sites as it does to the events that occurred there, which might have either been actively repressed or simply

overlooked. I find the German expression *Nebenschauplatz* useful in this respect. It expresses the idea of a secondary stage that has little or no audience; a minor setting of a major historical event that takes place elsewhere or indeed a contemporary backwater beyond the attention and glare of the media. For example, Nasser's declaration of the nationalisation of the Suez Canal from a balcony of the Alexandria Cotton Exchange in 1956 was an orchestrated media event that was broadcast to the nation and the world. In contrast, the tearing down of Lesseps' statue at the entrance of the Suez Canal in Port Said was locally organised and made it as a newspaper headline only after an interval of many months. The tearing down of the colonial building of the Cotton Exchange itself – rendered superfluous since the cotton trade had de facto been nationalised along with the canal – was not reported at all. Meanwhile, the story of the 14 cargo ships that were trapped in the Suez Canal on the outbreak of the 1967 war was initially reported by the countries that had crews there, but failed to make it even as a footnote into the many accounts and books written about this key event whose repercussions still shape the region today.

Despite, or perhaps because they have little or no visibility, these places seem to connect to, and conjure up both the larger historical events *and* the present contexts. The empty plinth in Port Said is still there, continuing to mark the absence of the statue (and the end of first-hand colonialism in Egypt) which functions like a huge question mark as to what has replaced it. And it has since become a new secondary setting during the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Mush 2, the last major and unfinished Soviet housing project in Northern Armenia might be totally off-grid, officially unrecognised and not even indicated on maps, but people do live there. Their survival in the cracks of a dysfunctional market economy and in the shadow of the seismic collapse of Soviet Socialism is the kind of aftershock that Richter scales can neither measure nor represent. While there are very few visual documents attesting to a former Armenian presence in the original Mush in Eastern Anatolia, the buildings themselves and what I refer to as the homeless ghosts speak volumes. By creating a continuity between past and present, these minor sites undermine the very concept of a finite event situated in a chronological succession, a singular location or a causal chain. This also affects the way I want to represent them, that is, in a complex web of temporal, spatial and representational intricacies, rather than restoring linearity and singularity to them. I try to connect archival fragments to the quotidian present and focus on

different kinds of material traces as well as various survival techniques…
I sometimes think of this in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's character-
isation of what they call minor literature, "not the literature written in a
minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major lan-
guage", thus deterritorialising it from within. And because minor litera-
ture "exists in a cramped space, every individual matter is plugged
into the political. Thus it becomes all the more necessary, indispensable,
magnified microscopically, because a whole other story is vibrating
in it."

ANDREA I like the notion of a "vibrating" other story, one that might not
be acknowledged but is able to destabilise a certain pattern or perception,
something that causes unrest from beneath. I feel that beyond this com-
plex web of temporal, spatial and representational intricacies, as you call
it, there is a form that takes up the sideways and "incomplete" or non-
linear notion of temporality and the folding into each other of the current
condition and events that happened there in the past; a sense of moving
into your installations, of becoming involved as an active viewer. I feel
invited to find one of many possible ways through the various fragments,
adding them together and making connections between them. It seems
to me that you are very cautious about leaving this space for the viewer.

But I would like to turn to another aspect of openness. By trying to
listen to the "vibrating" other stories, you refer to very specific contexts,
to specific stories that you research over longer periods of time. Yet there
is something in the works that connects to more universal themes.
Attempts to construct national history, the devastating implications of
colonialism or a sense of being captured in another, a parallel time zone,
for example. I would like to ask you about this aspect of "responsibility"
towards the material you find and work with and what it means for
that material to enter an artistic practice rather than the practice of a his-
torian, a journalist or a sociologist. (Without suggesting that these are
necessarily strictly separate things.)

URIEL Precisely because my work is anchored in art but I am also inter-
ested in and borrow from other disciplines, it is important to me to stay
faithful to the specificity of the places or stories I represent. This does not
mean that I don't allow myself to take certain liberties, as I'm not con-
strained by the rules of those disciplines. At the same time, however,

I don't want to abuse this freedom – or poetic license – and let the places and stories, the people and their histories, become mere pretexts. I think two things are at stake here. The first is the notion of the universal that you addressed. I believe that in order to touch upon and perhaps connect with more universal themes or questions, one has to stay close to specificity. Only by focusing on the specific – from everyday details and the sheer materiality of things (and images) to the complex historicity of places – only through a kind of micrological approach can more universal concerns and connections become apparent in a meaningful way. Otherwise, we are simply in the realm of the general, and generalisations don't seem very interesting to me. The second aspect, which you also point to, is that of responsibility. By taking on places or histories that are not "mine" as it were, I enter into a kind of unspoken contract; that is, I become answerable to those places and histories. This does not mean that I am a spokesperson for them; it has more to do with a kind of ethics that demands a certain engagement and faithfulness. Otherwise the work would run the risk of simply being another form of tourism. But of course this ethics is not one which is only restricted to me or the work. As you say, the viewer is also, or should be, implicated in this relationship. And of course, it is even larger than that: it seems to me that in a globalised world where goods, news and images reach us from far-flung places, we are automatically entangled in a web of responsibilities. The same is true for history. It is no longer tenable (if it ever was) to say that this or that past event doesn't concern us because we are not connected to it (through time or place). In my own practice, this realisation manifested itself in a profound shift: in earlier work, such as *1942 (Poznan)*, I was already interested in the ethics of a contemporary site that confronts us with a violence in the past – a swimming pool converted from a synagogue by the Nazis. Even though the work was not autobiographical as such, there was still a personal connection. In the view of some that connection might lend the work authenticity, but at the same time it might shield the viewer from his or her own implication and responsibility. Starting with *The Benin Project* I wanted to address the question of who is or should be concerned about an event more head on, by exposing myself to this question, and in a sense, attempting to leave the dialectic of perpetrator and victim: since the Benin artifacts looted by the British in 1897 are dispersed in over 500 museums and collections worldwide, we are all somehow implicated in their displacement.

ANDREA I think *The Benin Project* is a very good example for what you describe about the specific opening up to the more universal. Among other parts, I'm thinking about the scene in the photo-essay *The Visitor* where you are meeting the king of Benin to tell him about your project on the stolen artifacts and ask him for permission to film in Benin. During this royal audience one of the chiefs tells you to go look for similar practices taking place today. I really like this scene because it brings together a lot of issues. The need to ask for permission in order not to repeat a colonial gesture, for example, as well as questions around the somewhat troubling fact that there is an interest in historic artifacts and in a post-colonial reflection and critique, but next to this there is sometimes little interest in some of the artistic practices of artists working in Benin or other places today.

Here I would like to go back to what you mentioned above about the autobiographical connection lending a sense of authenticity to the work. I feel that this is something we often encounter in different ways. Be it that non-Western artists are expected to produce work about their origins or that only women are potentially interested in feminist issues. This is an identity politics where speaking from a position and perspective of one's own experiences of repression and exclusion aims to achieve representation and inclusion as part of a struggle for social rights. Of course, it does make a difference whether something is experienced personally or not, especially if we are talking about genocide, colonialism and war. Yet art might also be a way to create connections between different traumatic experiences. If we think about the way a book can connect us to a story, for example, and how this connection can form an interdependence of different times, lives and experiences. When you write about the specific and the universal, I feel it touches on this. It is always in the complexities of the specific that one can connect to other (his / her) stories and by doing so draw attention to the ways through which parallel and sideways narratives are often overwritten by more dominant, linear accounts of history.

URIEL This constant overwriting of history and the palimpsests it gives rise to is what drew me – in the video *Holy Precursor* – to Chengeli, the Kurdish village that was built on the site of the ancient Armenian monastery of Surb Karapet, one of the most important sites of Armenian pilgrimage. The monastery itself was built on the site of a Greek temple for

Demeter the mother-goddess of harvest and the cycle of life and death. It was partially destroyed during the Armenian Genocide in 1915, but the ruin of the monastery was only reduced to rubble by the Turkish military in the 1960s as part of an ongoing practice aimed at erasing all signs of Armenian cultural heritage in Turkey. The village was built using the stones of the blown-up remains of the monastery. And in the 1990s the village itself became a target for the military during the Kurdish separatist guerrilla wars, so the cycle of violence continues. I keep thinking of Benjamin's angel of history: "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." But what is interesting to me in this famous image – for it is a word image as well as an actual painting by Paul Klee – is the ethical relationship of the gaze to time: while he is propelled into the future he is not turning away from the past but keeps looking at it. Images, or image-practices, that emerge out of and are mindful of this relationship are necessarily steeped in both aesthetics and politics.

ANDREA Besides being a beautiful image, there is something interesting in the linkage of the gaze and the question of distance, too. And I like the fact that it is set in a storm, since normally one would think the further one moves away from a catastrophe the quieter it gets. Instead, the storm is a reminder of a somewhat unforeseeable direction and an uncontrollable force, quite different to the rational conception of progress that prevails in Western societies.

The image of the "angel of history" also made me think about another term that has come up again and again in conversations we have had about your practice, perhaps mostly so in relation to your film *Remnants of the Future*. I'm thinking about the notion of "haunting". It seems there is a similar idea of uncontrollable movement and the facing of the past while catching up with the present inscribed in it. As Avery Gordon writes, haunting destabilises the distinction between past and present, it is a way of knowing – against ones will, at times – what has happened.

My feeling is that there is a possibility for art to move in this space, to reconnect the present to forgotten or overseen moments in history and to imagine voices speaking to us from the future. Or to put it the other way round: to keep multiple times and places in the present, simultaneously. You point to the link between aesthetics and politics, which is very important, as it is in the realm of aesthetics that questions about "how" to look at and speak about such a relationship are posed.

URIEL The notion of haunting has become increasingly important to me, precisely because of the way it points to an urgency by linking a temporal rupture with an unfixed representation. In this sense it is quite different from the way trauma has been conceived. Unlike trauma, which is part of it, haunting is a failed repression and produces "a something to be done" (Avery Gordon). Haunting also lets us know that places are peopled. In *Holy Precursor* no one ever appears, but we sense that the place is inhabited by people as well as by spirits. When filming in Mush 2 for *Remnants of the Future*, I was struck by the way people seemed to appear out of nowhere in this deserted vast cityscape, eking out an existence at the edge of society and time. Avery Gordon writes "the ghost is not just a missing or dead person but a social figure at the juncture of history and subjectivity". How to represent such a figure? How to find the right distance or proximity to it when filming? These are both practical and conceptual questions, aesthetic and ethical. And they reveal the political in different ways. When I first filmed in Port Said in 2010 it was impossible to film on the street and I had to shoot the empty plinth at the entrance of the Suez Canal out of the window of my hotel room. When I returned in spring 2011 after the revolution my shots are street-level, close-ups. Both times there was a sense of a "cover up", but differently. The camera might not be able to reveal what is not visible, but by looking, by looking differently or looking insistently, it might be able to evoke fugitive forms of knowledge; by framing something it also points to what is beyond the frame, the outside of the image.

Transmission Log

URIEL TO ANNA Since my return from Gyumri I've been full of questions. Spending time there I felt constantly slipping between its different layers, pre-Soviet, Soviet and post-Soviet, which are apparent in its repeated renaming: Alexandropol, Leninankan, Gyumri. I keep thinking about the closed eyes of Merkurov's death masks, the way they seem to look inward, refusing to engage with the present, to return the gaze and instead seem to dream about past and future, without allowing us access to either. The masks are an anachronism themselves, made in the first Soviet decades long after photography replaced the practice of the death mask as a memento mori (and indexical representation). Who insisted on having them made, and why? Death has leveled their lives, passions and achievements. For us, now, it is the list of names that creates a spiral of associations: Eisenstein, Lenin, Tolstoy, Mayakovsky… In Mush, it's the opposite: the blank, black stare of the glassless window frames seems to look onto an eternal present, stuck between a past that is still waiting to happen and a future that is already over: time is out-of-joint. The buildings in their various states of semi-construction are ruins in reverse, oscillating between the not-yet and the no-longer. They are not buildings from which life has departed, but are still waiting for life to arrive. And spatially, too, Mush, is

besides itself, a phantom of another Mush, peopled by the ghosts of another community beyond the contemporary border nearby… The naming itself is full of ambiguity; is it homesickness for a former home or nationalist yearning for a re-united territory? And what does it mean to commemorate the loss of life in a natural catastrophe with a previous loss of life through organised expulsion and killing of a people?

> ANNA TO URIEL I had the same reaction when I visited the Merkurov Museum in 2007. The reality these "great men" once lived in, projected, or imagined to live in, is no longer present. Their reality doesn't match anything that exists now. Their gathering in this one-room museum appears like some sort of Politbureau. But I'd like to leave the museum and rejoin your comparison with Mush. Traditionally, if you lost your child, you would give your next child the name of his or her dead brother or sister. The person with that name would then live their life haunted by the memory of the dead, and this fact would give their life a peculiar uncanniness.
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> The "presence" of both these places named Mush, one in Turkey where my grandparents used to live before 1915, and the other one in Armenia, a

new unfinished neighbourhood in Gyumri built after the 1988 earthquake, shows the connections between catastrophes, revealing history in a haunted present. When I am in the Gyumri Mush, faced by this spectral presence, my own personal history becomes an integral part of the present. Yet, I cannot look at Mush in Armenia without thinking about the other one in Turkey. I find it interesting to speak about ghosts because they have to do both with the past and the present, with the real and the unreal, with history and fiction. I believe that the Mush in Gyumri is the memorial left by history by its own hands for the original Mush. With the earthquake of 1988, the old trauma of the genocide was reactivated, and that's what is signified through the name of Mush, but with the construction of the neighbourhood, this name is transformed into a new narration. And yet, no one knows why this name was given, and who decided on it.

Armenia is covered by villages bearing the names of the other, lost Armenia, bearing the memory of their origin. These places build a cartography of otherwise invisible populations, they testify to discrete survivals. I don't think that these ghosts have anything to do with national-

ism, although they can be instrumentalised politically. In my opinion, this haunting, which repeatedly produces new ghosts, is one of the causes of the social schizophrenia that prevents people from creating lasting social relations.

URIEL TO ANNA I like your description of Mush not as a ghost-city but as a city of ghosts, which are hovering between and are rooted in both the past and the present. But I feel that Mush extends the ghostly also into the future. I've recently been revisiting Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, where he focuses on the first sentence of *The Communist Manifesto* (written of course well before any communist regime existed), "a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism", and poses the question of the future of this spectre (in our present), or the spectre of the future, or even *the future as spectre*.

Doing research around some of the other ghosts, in the Merkurov Museum, I came across Mayakovsky's play *Banya* (*The Bathhouse*, 1930) which was banned temporarily because it dealt critically with Soviet officials. In *Banya* a time machine is invented; it is suggested that it could also be used for speeding up boring political speeches. The Phosphorescent Woman, an emissary from the future, arrives in the Soviet hinterland.

The opportunity to travel through time is offered to hard-working individuals who have not lost touch with their humanity. I think in my film, the Phosphorescent Woman will visit the people of Mush, accompanied by the sound of pulsars, that Mikhail has been collecting.

> MIKHAIL TO URIEL Pulsars are dying stars. After a star has used up all its energy and burnt all its elements that are flammable, it reaches a point where it's left mainly with iron which does not burn. Remember that a star is by its nature a burning, light emitting object and at this last phase of its life, it spins very fast emitting radio waves. These are the pulses that we pick up and can hear. In the way a lighthouse emits light in regular intervals, pulsars emit radio waves. That's why we first mistook these regular messages for intelligent life messages from outer space. I think the dying stars also conjure up associations with futurism, utopianism, Soviet space exploration and coded radio signals by spies and, of course, the symbol of Communism itself, the Red Star.

What interests me is that these radio waves, like the last light of the dying stars, still reach us long after they have disappeared … ghosts again.

PS: What was it like when you first visited the other Mush – that of your grandparents, that of stories and songs?

ANNA TO URIEL In 2005, Stefan Kristensen and I accompanied a group of people travelling by coach from Armenia to Eastern Turkey. In total about 30 people, all of them children or grand-children of survivors. We took this trip from the beginning as a "voyage to the land of the ghosts", and all along we discovered that the ghosts were also in the group, with us, and not only in the country. Every time someone went to the village of his / her ancestors, the group would follow. I also discovered the village of my grandmother, in the plain of Mush. The Kurdish villagers told me the story of Güle, the heroine of the song my grandmother loved to sing. This Mush made me silent. In Gyumri, in front of the neighbourhood called Mush, I suddenly remembered the lyrics of the song about the "original" Mush:

They say the plain of Mush is a sweet land
I'd say maybe!
The air you breathe is a remedy for
your mouth
this isn't possible, no!

15

*They say the plain of Mush has five
hundred villages*
most of them are still named with their
ancient name.
The air you breathe is a remedy for the sick
I wish it was.