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## David Reeb: Traces of Things to Come

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- \_\_\_\_\_. Exhibition catalogue for Olafur Eliasson's *Riverbed*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (20 August 2014 – 4 January 2015), 2014.

## Notes

21. Eliasson in *Olafur Eliasson: Space is Process* (H. Lundø and J. Jørgensen, 2010).
22. <http://en.louisiana.dk/exhibition/olafur-eliasson>
23. A more in-depth tracing of this lineage can be found in Grynsztejn 2007.
24. For more on these works in relation to cinema see Trodd 2008, p. 375.
25. Mondloch 2010, p. 26.
26. Eliasson in the exhibition catalogue 2014, p. 56.
27. Balsom 2013, p. 51.
28. Eliasson in the exhibition catalogue 2014, p. 86.
29. Bishop 2004, p. 65.
30. D. Birnbaum does offer a reading of Eliasson's work in relation to the theories presented by Bourriaud in Grynsztejn 2007, pp. 131-143.
31. Eliasson in the exhibition catalogue 2014, p. 89.

## About the author

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## David Reeb: Traces of Things to Come

Leshu Torchin

On 30 May 2014 the Tel Aviv Museum opened the exhibition *Traces of Things to Come* featuring the Israeli artist David Reeb.<sup>32</sup> On the heels of this opening came the 10<sup>th</sup> Tel Aviv International Colloquium of Cinema and Television Studies, titled *Cinematic Traces of Things to Come* and focused on the mediation of impossible pasts and possible futures. Although not affiliated with the conference the exhibition crystallised and illustrated its preoccupations. Meanwhile, Operation Protective Edge was poised to begin in July that year. This military crackdown on Hamas in response to the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli citizens caused pro-

found destruction and numerous civilian casualties in Gaza. With these traces of things to come the exhibit became all the more urgent and meaningful.

Traces of Things to Come provided a retrospective of Reeb's work of the past 20 years (1994-2014), spanning a range of styles: black-and-white, colour (monochromatic or multi-hued), abstract, decorative, and figurative; also, paintings of photographs as well as a recent (2005) turn to video. That Reeb's work cuts across so many categories makes it well suited to his subject: Israel and the Occupation, a conflict where regions and identities are in flux. Moreover, it is a highly mediated conflict that persists across time and inhabits both public and private space. The exhibition immerses the visitor in a gallery space haunted by war, both implicitly and explicitly.

Reeb's number paintings call attention to that which is pervasive and liminal. Pictures of what is traditionally written call attention to mediation and display, while the figures themselves challenge and enhance interpretation, becoming something simultaneously connotative and denotative. It is here that the visitor is immersed – not only by many of these paintings hanging on the walls but also the subtitle of the exhibition itself, '300 60 48', which takes its name by combining the title of three of these paintings.<sup>33</sup> An interpretation requires both specialist and historical knowledge, as these paintings combine Israel's political history with the painter's own. 48 features one of Reeb's favoured tropes: numbers arranged in grid formation, suggestive of mathematical or cartographic coordinates. In this painting the number 48 inhabits each cell on this grid, which runs six across and eight down (6×8), making 48 in total. Even without the repetition the number is portentous: 1948 (or '48) is the year of Israel's emergence as an independent state and of the Arab-Israeli war, a milestone that fuses creation with destruction. 60 counts to 60, the age of the artist at the time of the painting, with a curious transposition of the numbers 25 and 26 midway through that is unexplained. 300 counts down from 60 (also in grid formation) and seems to combine the personal and the political, referencing both the artist's age (although I could not find a date for this painting) and the Bus 300 affair. This refers to an incident in 1984 when, following the takeover a hijacked bus, Shin Bet (security service) operatives executed two of the captured Palestinian hijackers. The painting invokes cases of institutional violence, its cover-up by the state and media, and the Israeli inquiry into the murders and their concealment.<sup>34</sup> Notably, 300 either launches or ends the title of the exhibit, depending on whether one reads these as numbers, and thus from left to right, or as text, in which case they could be read right to left in either Hebrew or Arabic. The potential for ambiguity creates an unstable temporality and feedback loop of violence in which the artist is embroiled.

This merger of the personal and the political, the legible and the mystifying, is present in 73 (2012), whose numbers initially seem to confound interpretation.

Organised across another grid formation (this one six across and ten down), the numbers (beginning in the upper left-hand corner) range from 52-99 before starting again at 00-12. Upon a second look and armed with the knowledge that the artist was born in 1952 one can read this as the numbers that range from 1952 to the year of the painting, 2012, with 60 cells in the grid – or the age of the artist in 2012. But one number is missing here: 73, the year of the Yom Kippur War, and a year in which the artist would have served in the military. It is the calculation of a life that both accounts for and occludes its components, the meaning reduced to figures and a crucial year left out as a structural absence. After all, including the cell for 73 would disrupt the 6x10 balance that comprises Reeb's 60 years.

The ominous presence lurking in the mundane is another theme of this exhibition. *Israel Wants War* (2001) presents an acrylic cityscape against a blue night sky. The painting is almost guileless in a presentation of primary colours and flat block figures of buildings and cars. In the sky there are stars, a red circle with lines that suggest the silhouettes of oncoming planes, and a sign poised atop the tallest building that reads 'Israel Wants War' in Hebrew. The painting provides a pointed critique of Israel's claims to peace building, situating the militaristic desire within the industry and landscape of the nation and in its most primary assertions. This childlike expression takes cruel force in *Arik Eats Children* (2001), at one time banned from an exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum but present at this one (albeit with no mention of the earlier censorship).<sup>35</sup> Simple line drawings of red and orange fish suggest both a rhetoric of innocence and the shape of a missile as they prepare to swallow one another. The words 'Sunshine' and 'Napalm' are painted in English with the bottom phrase, the title, painted in Hebrew. The controversy that kept the painting out of earlier exhibitions is understandable, as the critique of Ariel (Arik) Sharon invokes cannibalism and by extension the anti-Semitic accusation of blood libel that frames all too many critiques of Israel and Israeli policy. Regardless, the painting offers a stinging indictment of an embedded threat of constant war, one that is pushed upon children as assault and as ideology that consumes generations.

Politics and portent make their way through all the works, even those that might seem at first glance commonplace. A series of paintings of houseplants merge the mundane and the spectre of conflict. Many of these works seem innocuous, particularly those that position the two leady and potted plants against a range of backgrounds (blue, multi-coloured, fragmented black mirror pattern). Other paintings, such as *Cancelled Houseplants* (2009), are unsettling. One (*Painting #5*) positions the spectator behind the bars of what appears to be a window, breaking the image into a grid, while another (*Painting #4*) practically obscures the plants with stripes of interlocking black paint, creating an image of plants that are virtually caged or beset. Moreover, the image of the houseplant appears in an

earlier work *Names* (1998), also on display, which shows a houseplant on a chair in front of an unevenly tiled wall with the names of men written across them. A green line on the left outlines the space of Israel. The painting becomes a story of everyday compartmentalisation with names of people written in various boxes – a memorial of violence hidden in the everyday. Even that which would seem to be free of politics is not.

The houseplants appear in Reeb's *Let's Have Another War* series, which perhaps best exemplifies the cyclical, ever-present, and eminently mediated aspects of the conflict. *Let's Have Another War with Houseplants* (1997) depicts an off-centre grid, a 3×3 arrangement but with another row of three encroaching, pushing the right side off the frame. In each box is a chair with a houseplant placed atop it. At first seemingly identical the images actually vary, with different amounts of black acrylic moving into each micro-frame. Each image is haunted by this encroaching darkness and by the repetition that suggests they will be displaced by the coming column (whether from the left or the right). This is the military incursion – that is, intrusion – of everyday space.

Such is the 'spatial cyclic structure' that Ginton observes and which inflects this series that is, despite the houseplant iteration, more preoccupied with the repetition of war through political action and mediation. Bearing the words 'Lets [sic] Have Another War' somewhere on the canvas, this series reproduces photojournalist Miki Kratsman's photographs of the Tunnel War in Ramallah (September 1996) in acrylic. This remediation calls attention to the translations and transformations that occur in the process of representing and bearing witness to a war, from the actions that take place through reportage and to the spectator, who reads and retransmits what is seen whether in words or images. In *Let's Have Another War #1* (1997) the title, encased in its own border, bisects two vignettes: above there are two men with guns, below a woman runs toward the camera with a group of men crouching behind her watching. Inhabiting the uneasy territory of multiple mediation (both word and image), the words also become a demarcation of territory on pictures that are disrupted by other encroaching boundaries.

The relationship between the neatly ordered and the relentlessly cyclical comes to the fore in *Let's Have Another War #7* (1997), which translates a contact sheet into an acrylic painting. Each shot is contained within the borders of the photographic frame while the words 'lets have another war' repeat across the canvas underneath almost each strip with no punctuation to mark its place in time or space. Each of these works confront the notion of the finite as temporal while spatial borders are pressed repeatedly, with the conflict looming as a threat in peacetime and as something that will not be resolved in the current war. Even as each box and each line would suggest definable circumscription the title, the number that indicates its place in a series, and the recurrence of themes and

words speak to something incessant. The phrase recognises the repetitiveness of the conflict as one war begets another. The near cheeriness of the phrase combines the impulses of news media and the military as each image carries along a joy at justifying itself. War is a force that gives these institutions meaning, to paraphrase Chris Hedges.

The implication of these images is crucial, as the paintings of the photojournalistic effort intervene into the claims of documentary transparency. The contact sheet calls attention to the number of images of an action to be selected before they are presented in the newspaper or online, if they are seen at all. The larger canvases of *Let's Have Another War* equally evoke process, not only through painting and adaptation but also through the interventions of the painter. Reeb adds paint to some of these pictures (such as *Let's Have Another War #8* [1997], not included in this exhibit) and he combines shots into a single frame, reminding us of the power of the unseen interlocutor to produce meaning through association. As Reeb has stated about these works, the canvas can be a screen or a barrier.<sup>36</sup> Each painting then contains an encounter. The visitor sees something that is both in flux and yet captured at that moment. There is a confrontation and negotiation of borders as little stays within its limits. A recurring war returns. Media come together as a history travels across platforms, from photograph to paint, from news reportage to art gallery.

The imbrication of art and politics (or perhaps their persistent distance despite all) becomes a theme in the exhibition. There are hints in two of the paintings visible near the end of the exhibit. *Beautiful Architecture* (1997) provides yet another acrylic translation of Miki Kratsman's photojournalism, in this case an Israeli soldier (or so it would seem) aiming a gun below a landscape of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. In *Kiryat* (2008) the visitor would be hard pressed to miss its setting: in the foreground is a Henri Moore sculpture from the concrete garden that surrounds the Tel Aviv Museum, and in the background one sees The Kiryat, where the Israeli General Staff, or the command of the Israeli Defense Forces, is headquartered.

A sonic component of the exhibition enhances this intersection of art and politics and the presence of the Occupation in every day life, no matter how seemingly invisible. Standing before this painting one can hear sounds emanating from two spaces around the corner. In these rooms one finds videos of weekly demonstrations in Bil'in, Ni'ilin, and Nabi Saleh, which Reeb has chronicled since 2005 and uploaded to YouTube since 2007. These videos, whose stills are transformed into acrylic paintings that hang in the hall alongside the others, are perhaps the most curious and compelling of all the pieces in the collection. They are not edited into short expository films for the gallery visitor, as one might expect. Rather, these appear to be assemblages of the many protests filmed and of all their

actors: the demonstrators, the visiting activists from America and Europe, the news media, and the soldiers. The videos offer a surfeit of meaning and mediation as each player on screen seems to enact a role in his or her story, sometimes for the camera and sometimes for each other. The zone of conflict itself is not so simply demarcated, even as checkpoints and guards hold boundaries challenged by the protesters. Meanwhile, the lengthy and occasionally repetitive collection of weekly vignettes reproduces the ongoing nature of the conflict, its constancy, and perhaps all the more dismaying, its lack of resolution. As fascinating as the videos are their status is unclear. Visitors receive little in the way of directions for reading this material. The absence of documentation to explain the videos or their contents gestures to the difficulties of decoding even the most seemingly objective of materials, much as his earlier paintings highlighted the challenges of deciphering numerical aggregations.

For some critics this merger of the political documentary video with the museum space risks neutralisation through institutionalisation.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the context calls into question their function, but is it necessarily one that subdues these portraits of dissent? The liveness of the medium also confronts the delimiting aspect of Reeb's paintings, which arrest each frame, mounting its figures into a lifelike state; it calls to attention the museum's own occupations that categorise, arrange, and preserve. Perhaps in the arrangement one finds yet another encounter between borders, another conflict that destabilises certainty of distinctions between temporalities and between art and politics, between private and public space, and between a 'there' that is beset and a 'here' of relative, seeming quiet.

It is true that the political engagement function of the videos is diminished within this setting. It is not being used in meetings to excite the public, for instance. However, one has to wonder if the YouTube site is any more political. On the site itself there is simply a list of videos, each accompanied by limited information – a place, a date, and a brief description such as: 'Protest by the Palestinian village of Nabi Saleh, near Ramallah, on Friday 19.9.2014, against the Israeli occupation, against the theft of their land and water and against apartheid.'<sup>38</sup> In fact, Reeb's site is remarkable for the general absence of contextualisation or efforts at mobilisation, such as a link to an activist site. Even the war protests are integrated matter-of-factly within this collection of border demonstrations, mingling the daily military encounter with those of wartime. Perhaps one day a resolution will come and confer, in retrospect, a narrative trajectory onto the videos, one that makes meaning of these numbers in the titles and of the digital data – but not yet. Those too are the traces of things to come.

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## Notes

32. Many thanks are due to Ellen Ginton, the Senior Curator of The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, who shared the brochure, thus facilitating my writing process, and to Professor Anat Zanger (Tel Aviv University), who visited the exhibit with me. Anat's company was not only pleasurable but it also generated stimulating conversations that greatly enriched my perspective.
33. Ginton 2014, p. 40.
34. The Bus 300 affair is addressed in the Israeli documentary *The Gatekeepers* (Dror Moreh, 2012), a critical examination of Shin Bet, the internal security service of Israel.
35. Yahav 2014.
36. Faulkner 2008.
37. See, for instance, Dann 2014.
38. David Reeb, 'Nabi Saleh 19.9.2014' YouTube.com, uploaded 20 September 2014: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6\\_jm7sNO6I&list=UU5ilhKgvGdQ8Io8E-uPorpQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6_jm7sNO6I&list=UU5ilhKgvGdQ8Io8E-uPorpQ).

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