



Maya Zack: Living Room

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The exhibition "Living Room" features, for the first time together, two of Maya Zack's major works: the video piece *Mother Economy* and the installation *Living Room*.^{*} Created two years apart, these works display many similarities which attest to Zack's profound and consistent interest in notions of memory, testimony, loss, commemoration, and identity—concepts which nourish the intricate human mechanism of identity construction and representation, relying largely on the historical, personal, and collective narratives structuring it. The memory and the testimony recounting it, however, often mislead us—whether with the passing of days in ordinary times, or when they fall silent and are distorted more forcefully in the aftermath of trauma.¹

In order to bespeak the elusive complexity of these notions, Zack places her works—as a formative, entirely non-accidental test case—in the life of the Jewish bourgeoisie in pre-World War II Berlin, as a charged site of an impending catastrophe.²

We, the viewers, observe Zack's works as investigators at a crime scene, culling fragments of information. The remaining objects are the guardians of testimony, disclosing the place, time, and event: the dinner service, the Biedermeier style furniture, the mouthpiece of the Jewish community *Jüdische Rundschau* that has fallen on the floor, a Hanukkah *menorah* and a Christmas tree next to it, a violin, a tennis racket and ballet shoes, a 1936 model Korting radio still playing a familiar tune of the period or broadcasting a speech in German. Theorist Peter Wollen characterized forensic art as an obsessive engagement with the depiction of the surface, instead of reconstructing the crime itself or depicting its horrendous results. This point of departure, in fact, gives rise to feelings of alienation, even estrangement. It presents viewers with an indifferent, numb world view.³ At the same time, the emptiness also signifies the occurrence of a catastrophe so terrible that it cannot be articulated or represented at all.

The cardinal role of testimony and memory in the construction of identity has been pertinent to the human condition throughout all eras, and is not unique to the period in question. At the same time, one may construe Zack's focus on this specific period in the context of the contemporary local artistic discourse, which ties the exploration of its origins with the memory of the Holocaust and with the bourgeois Ashkenazi world that was obliterated (as in Erez Israeli's exhibition "Friday Night" and Yitzhak Livneh's



"Astonishment"). Another context arises in Zack's own biography. The works took shape following a roots journey to Slovakia with her father and sister, during which they visited her grandmother's childhood home. The unmediated encounter with the place, the house, and the actual geographic setting were accompanied by feelings of emptiness, lack, and absence, invoked by the desperate attempt to extract and imagine the life that once took place inside the walls of the house still standing.

The installation *Living Room* reconstructs, via computer-generated 3D simulations, Manfred Namburg's parents' apartment in Berlin. In 1936, as a child, Namburg's parents managed to sneak him out to Palestine. Nothing is known of their fate. In his testimony** Manfred describes his parents' home to Zack, but his memory is not what it once had been. A walk through the house's interior reveals details escaping therefrom, obliterated, blurred, subtracted. What was the image which disappeared from the pictures on the wall? What did the big flower pot look like? What was the shape of the bookshelves? The term "Living Room" ironically alludes to the absence of life from both the reality and the work before us. Together, the four photographs comprise a comprehensive picture of the modern, advanced, bourgeois home, concealing a promise for hours of ease, leisure, and comfort: a house filled with inviting furniture, rich in cultural objects, boasting state-of-the-art, efficient equipment. But the house fails in its basic task—to provide its dwellers with shelter and protection. Its windows are broken, its walls are exposed and cracked. The domestic setting calls to mind Freud's discussion of the "uncanny" (*Das Unheimliche*) which ties the domestic, the homely (denoted by the German term) and familiar with feelings of distress and fear.⁴ The appearance of the house is akin to a journey into the depths of memory, a plunge into that which has been repressed in the subconscious, a conjuring up of the imaginary-real. The penetration into memory is likened in the work to the holes gaped in the walls of the house, that expose the inner plumbing and the hidden spaces between the rooms.

Zack did not settle for a depiction of the house itself from four points of view which reconstruct the square interior of the residential apartment. The act of reconstruction is reinforced by the use of 3D spectacles and the creation of a depth illusion, an act reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges's cartographers in "Of Exactitude in Science," who sketch a 1:1 map, thereby illustrating the representation apparatus with its most quintessential tools, and at the same time challenging it.⁵ The artistic act, like the spoken and written words and like memory, strives to represent something in reality by means of



its signs, while acknowledging the fact that it is a mere representation; by its very nature, it presupposes a measure of falsity, illusion, and lie regarding its ability to manifest the actual reality.

In the recently deserted living room, the fine dishes and the food are still scattered on the dining table, as customary in 17th-century Dutch still-life (*nature morte*) scenes, serving as a moralist reminder of the vanity of life (*vanitas*), warning us of excessive pride in the material world, suggesting the fleeting nature of life, and commanding us to remember that we must die (*memento mori*).

The film *Mother Economy* expresses, differently, the aforementioned values of evidence, testimony, commemoration, and representation. The work follows the pedantic, industrious practice of a homemaker as she arranges, sews, and bakes the traditional *kugel* (noodle pudding) for her family. This mother is wholly immersed in recording and calculating the data produced from the inventory of objects and items surrounding her in the affluence of her home. Hers is an analytic method which obeys the period's customary norms—as befitting the proper German nature and the good bourgeois upbringing. The absence of the family members is indicated by their personal items and pictures, which have remained to attest to their absence. The absence is noted, registered, and duly catalogued, with horrifyingly efficient precision. The feelings of "Mother Economy" are translated, in the spirit of Marxist criticism, to mere calculations of utility and profit. The inviting family table and the warm and emotional *kugel* are converted into values of production and consumption. The practical, measured acts of "Mother Economy" stand in stark contrast to the dimensions of the terrible catastrophe gradually building up around her. "Life goes on," and "Mother Economy" likewise goes on, despite the imminent catastrophe. She performs her daily chores without deviations, explicitly disregarding the absurd-tragic situation within which she functions. Her indifference only reinforces the repression and disregard of her and those around her of the coming disaster threatening to transform them into representations of memory.

Mother Economy and *Living Room* offer a journey into the depths of human memory and a life that is no more. The works introduce a distinctive critical tone rejecting the complacency and the tendency to repress and ignore the threatening voices lurking on one's doorstep. The exhibition strives to indicate both the obscure status of testimony and the false meaning of the artistic acts of representation, reconstruction, and perpetuation.



At the same time, the exhibition, as such, attests to the irreplaceable necessity of both in the construction of any personal and collective narrative.

Notes

1. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
2. In this context one should mention an earlier work by Zack, *Mocument (Anne Frank)*, 2005, which was, in fact, an exercise in "conveyed memory."
3. Peter Wollen, "Vectors of Melancholy," in Ralf Rugoff, *Scene of the Crime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 23-36.
4. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLinock (New York: Penguin, 2003).
5. Jorge Luis Borges, "Of Exactitude in Science," in: J. L. Borges, *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans.: Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 131.

* The exhibition "Living Room" features two works:

Living Room, 2009, an installation comprising 3D anaglyph photographs (to be viewed with 3D glasses) and sound, was awarded first prize in the competition for the Adi Prize for Jewish Expression in Art and Design 2009. It debuted as part of the prize finalists exhibition "Rupture and Repair" (curators: Emily Bilski and Aviva Kat-Manor) at the Jerusalem Artists' House, organized by the Adi Foundation in conjunction with the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Mother Economy, 2007, video-art, 19:45 min, sound

Actor: Idit Neuderfer

Created in 2007, this work has won numerous awards (among them, at the Imaginaria International Film Festival, Conversano, Italy; the Kinolevchyk International Festival of Video Art, Lviv, Ukraine; and Szemlétek Visionaudial Film Festival, Pécs, Hungary). It has been screened at the Jewish Museum, New York, and in various cinema and video-art festivals in Israel and abroad.

** A transcript of the testimony is available at the gallery reception desk.

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