

DAVID REEB: THE REFUSAL FRONT

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In a one-minute video from 2005, David Reeb positions himself next to the Separation Wall, near A-Ram.^{pp. 118, 129} The camera follows two large yellow trucks that advance slowly, gradually drawing away on the dirt road along the wall, still under construction. Nothing dramatic takes place. The viewer has enough time to observe the trucks shrink, to feel the violent dimensions of the wall and the extent of the damage to the landscape, to identify several trees and rooftops on the rear slope. Besides the thoughts about the violent wall, the eye is captivated by the pair of trucks driving off, into the horizon. The sound of engines fades and the landscape resumes its silence. The film, as aforesaid, has no dramatic climax, yet it is mesmerizing in its slow motion, which combines tenderness with obtuseness, ugliness with beauty. Reeb extracts a moment of rare beauty from the routine of construction work, the routine of occupation, the routine of ugliness and evil; a moment which only reinforces the sense of violence, violence as routine.

Reeb is an artist of the ordinary and routine. In his work, the occupation



חומה ומשאיות 3, סטיל מתוך וידאו
جدار وشاحنات 3, صور من فيديو
Wall and Trucks 3, video still

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2005

routine encounters quotidian city life and the routine of studio work. About thirty years ago he began incorporating the Green Line in his paintings: a green line on the street, a green line in the studio, a green line and planters. The occupation is everywhere, it is a part of the everyday. Reeb peels off the skin of the everyday, so to speak, exposing the defect underneath the cloak of normalcy. For a decade now, every Friday, he takes his video camera and documents the demonstrations in the Palestinian villages of Bil'in, Ni'ilin, and Nabi Saleh in the West Bank; routine demonstrations, as well. Every demonstration begins with a procession of the villagers—youth and children drumming, waving flags, shouting slogans—toward the Separation Wall and the confiscated village land.^{pp. 101, 121} Advancing towards them from the other side are Border Guard or IDF armored vehicles. The soldiers take their place at fixed concrete posts on the ridge, on the other side of the wall. At some point the demonstration reaches its peak—a few bold youths approach the wall, the soldiers fire teargas canisters and rubber-coated bullets, a riot begins, people run in all directions, someone gets hurt on occasion.^{pp. 273, 274} On April 17, 2009, Bassem Abu-Rahmah, one of the young men from the village, was killed only a few meters from the camera.¹ The camera follows his body on the stretcher, wrapped in a shroud, as he is being evacuated to hospital by car. On December 9, 2011, another protester, Mustafa Tamimi, was injured and killed a short distance from the camera. Many other videos show people getting injured, choking from teargas, ambulances evacuating the wounded, the demonstration which had dispersed re-gathers, gas canisters are fired once again, followed by racing and panic, and re-gathering. The demonstrations, even those involving casualties, often end with drumming, dance, and song.

Reality generates the plot, the décor, and the costumes. The soldiers are dressed in RoboCop style. The helmet erases individual features, lending them an anonymous look. A military jeep fitted with a “Scream” device approaches a group of demonstrators, transmitting high-pitched electronic sounds at unbearable decibels.^{pp. 118, 127} The protesters, many of them children, block the road and drum energetically. Noise vs. noise. In another demonstration, the protesters knock on the steel fence with stones. In one demonstration they are joined by a saxophone player. In Reeb's films there is no sound editing, and the sounds are often deafening. Just as the images repeat themselves, so do the sounds. Eye-soring and earsplitting. At some point an encounter takes place between the rhythmic slogan shouting and the sounds of shooting and grenade explosion.

1 The excerpt documenting the killing of Bassem Abu-Rahmah, aka Phil, was combined in Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi's Oscar-nominated documentary *5 Broken Cameras* (2012).

In each of the three shooting locations—Bil'in, where the weekly demonstrations started in February 2005, as well as Ni'ilin, and Nabi Saleh, which joined in later—Reeb takes his place in the same spots, on the margin of the demonstration, in a spot which overlooks the Israeli side. His point of view is usually on the Palestinian side. Sometimes he shifts momentarily to the Israeli side, following a group of soldiers in pursuit or joining soldiers who penetrate a private courtyard, climbing to the roof to shoot. At these moments of physical contact between the soldiers and the villagers, the differences between the dark uniform and the civilian clothes stands out, or between the aggressive body language and dominating tone of voice on the one hand, and the insult, rage, and helplessness on the other. “Shoo, make yourself scarce,” the commander shouts at the owner who is years his elder. The latter doesn't cave in and keeps protesting. The protest empowers him. Reeb takes up position close to the occurrences and continues filming. The communal protest has transformed, for several minutes, into the protest of the private man whose land and home have been invaded. There is something fascinating, and at the same time disconcerting, in these moments. On the whole, these videos are not easy to watch. Every few minutes the viewer hears an inner voice saying “I've seen enough” or “I get it,” urging him to stop watching. It is hard to put the disturbing element in these films into words. The identification with the Palestinian side, although painful, is not unbearable. The harder part is the inevitable sense of guilt invoked by the “Israeli” side. Harder still, virtually unbearable, is the gap between the anger invoked and the viewer's passivity and impotence. All the participants in the films, both Israeli and Palestinian, are up to their necks in reality. This activity is the focus of their consciousness. The viewer, on the other hand, is free to observe and contemplate. Is this what we expect to see in a museum? Is this art? Art aside, where does this film situate me as an Israeli? As a human being?



Managing to overcome the urge to stop watching, one may identify the uniqueness of each demonstration, its one-off quality. Each demonstration in itself is an instance of a present time. At the same time, however, one cannot avoid the fixed narrative repeating itself in every demonstration, exposing the timeless structure of the occurrence. The accumulating series of demonstrations surrenders a mythological, near Sisyphean structure of a serial, repetitious, existential struggle; a weekly ritual of rebellion and protest against the subjugating law. The law is the biggest, cruelest fool in this story: in the beginning of each demonstration a voice is heard over the loudspeakers, declaring: “This is an illegal demonstration!”, and every week the law wins the battle, but the war goes on.

Once the demonstration is dispersed, the police roadblock is removed and the line of village cars, that had to wait all this while, begins to move slowly. For them, the demonstration is possibly nothing more than a traffic obstruction, an interruption of the routine. The routine of the occupation comes up against the routine of resistance, and Reeb’s activist routine encounters the routine of the art consumer’s habits and taste. Just as the drivers must wait for the demonstration to end, the polite viewer, too, must wait for the end of the troubling film, which prevents him from going his way and getting on his consumerist habits. The video is stuck like a bone in one’s throat. You cannot swallow it and you cannot spit it out.

The video film is a testimonial. Reeb is the witness. Like Jan van Eyck who signed *The Arnolfini Marriage* portrait with the words, “Jan van Eyck was here, 1434,” each of Reeb’s films attests: “I was here, place and date.” The viewer is handed the testimonial writ. He will not be able to say later on, “I didn’t know.” Just as Reeb situates himself inside and outside the demonstration, the viewer must situate himself similarly in relation to the film. Once we know, we have responsibility. In this respect, Reeb invites the viewer to a type of activism, but at the same time, forces it upon him. Henceforth, not viewing or not responding to the film is a conscious decision—an artistic decision? a moral decision? a political one? Perhaps these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and perhaps even the question “Is this art?” is not an innocent “artistic” question, but rather a political one? In short, once you start contemplating it, things get complicated.

The videos are cataloged in Reeb’s website according to place and time, week by week. They are edited simply; linear editing devoid of manipulations, which compresses the entire demonstration into a minutes-long film. The

filming and editing routine is a part of Reeb's artistic practice, and it is equivalent to the painting. Returning from the demonstration to the studio, he isolates several frames from the video and paints them in acrylic on canvas. From the film of April 17, 2009, for instance, he froze the concluding image: the hospital door shutting after the protester's dead body passed through it.¹ p. 114 Through the door's near-opaque glass we see a silhouette, a blurred figure, and that's all. In another film documenting soldiers taking up positions on the roof of a private house, Reeb froze an image of five soldiers walking on a dirt road, next to a bougainvillea shrub.² pp. 120, 147 Their body language conveys a calm hooliganism. They are soldiers, but they are also friends. Unlike the dramatic tradition of classical war paintings which depict heroic moments, Reeb portrays the routine, quasi-naïve moments of war. A row of jeeps standing along the skyline, children waving flags, five handcuffed and blindfolded Palestinians sitting on the ground and next to them—a few soldiers conversing.² pp. 121, 149 Unlike war paintings, which focus on the figures of leaders and heroes, physical effort and courage, decisive moments or a turning point in battle, Reeb's combatants are anonymous and their activity is routine. It is staged, managed, and shaped by regulations, orders, and laws. The soldiers are, as aforesaid, the emissaries of the law, and the demonstrators protest against the law which they know too well. When one of the protesters is shot in the chest, his friend shouts at the soldiers: "Why direct targeting? You are not allowed direct targeting! There's a law."

Reeb's painting on the whole may be associated with many traditional painterly genres—war painting, historical painting, social realism, landscape painting, still life, portraiture and flower painting, geometric abstraction or Abstract Expressionism, serial, decorative patterns, etc. Each of these genres has its own conventions: What landscape is worthy of painting? What makes a beautiful decorative pattern? What is the right personality for a portrait? Which historical or war events ought to be perpetuated? The diversity of Reeb's painterly themes complies, as aforesaid, with a range of traditional genres, yet he disrupts and interrupts each of them over and over again. Reeb's painting is replete with "artistic misconduct." He obeys the law, and at the same time challenges it. The plants he portrays are not delicate flowers in vases, but rather a crudely-shaped Croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*) in a plastic pot. He paints the background in cobalt blue directly from the tube, and the plant's shadow in ultramarine, unrefined hues, sinful, impossible.³ p. 60 The decorative patterns are always suspect of assimilating a forbidden code or symbol, a bomb, or some subversive inscription.

2 The photograph after which this painting was made has an interesting history. The five Palestinian men handcuffed and blindfolded themselves voluntarily, as part of the demonstration. The soldiers approached them when they were already cuffed. In addition to the Palestinians and soldiers, the painting shows other photographers, additional witnesses who perpetuated the event. This painting was discussed at length in Simon Faulkner's essay; see: Simon Faulkner and David Reeb, *Between States* (London: Black Dog, 2014).

The portraits of the veteran Channel 1 anchorman Haim Yavin, or former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon emerge in Reeb's paintings repeatedly on television screens, very different from Rebrandesque portraits. To all appearances, everything has been flattened; there is no psychology, no inner world. Nevertheless, everything vibrates with vital painterly energy, with urgency, as if there was nothing more important, more personal, than painting Sharon's portrait dozens of times. Reeb depicts the events of the Intifada with the same urgency that he does a repetitive pattern of watermelon slices.^{p. 120} The link between the Intifada and the watermelon lies not in the theme but in the painting technique. Reeb's brush movement is swift, decisive, as if there were no "artistic" nuances. It is hard to pinpoint the beauty of these paintings, because it is not a "beautiful" beauty. At times it is even awkward or stammering, but like fingerprints—it never lies. Reeb paints in the "right dimensions." The helmeted soldiers standing on the street talking are far from Napoleon riding his horse in the snow in Russia or from Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). The painting does not extol the soldiers, but it does not make them ugly either. Despite the robotic quality, they are not monsters, they are just guys. Reeb recounts history through the story of everyday life. In his painterly oeuvre there is a serial, routine tendency to revisit the same place, the same image, the same "crime scene" over and over again.



Against the backdrop of Henry Moore's sculpture in the sculpture garden at the façade of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art we see the General Staff's antenna tower.^{p. 169} This is the painting's border-line: between what the eye is supposed to enjoy and what it is meant to overlook. Reeb shows us the commonplace, the familiar, what we overlook. An urban landscape in Tel Aviv, including the signs of Bank Leumi and Ackerstein interlocking stones, buses, a policeman checking the documents of an African refugee,^{p. 173} streets in the vicinity of the Central Bus Station, the luxury hotel skyline along the shore. Reeb observes the mundane, the most familiar thing which is the most invisible. His activism

manifests itself not only in demonstrations in Bil'in, but also in the quotidian gaze, which peels the skin off the obvious and hackneyed. He challenges our expectations of "art" and our perception of beauty, all this via the conservative medium of painting on canvas.

Reeb was an activist long before he started documenting demonstrations. Many of his classmates at the Bezalel School of Art had been, several years earlier, on compulsory military service in the Yom Kippur War (1973). Bezalel endured a stormy post-traumatic atmosphere which affected not only those who actively took part in the war; beyond the personal traumas, it was a pivotal site for a sense of a generational trauma. Reeb's class led the "student revolt" of 1977-78. His teachers at Bezalel included Moshe Gershuni, Micha Ullman, and Avital Geva, who dug pits in the ground and switched soil between Kibbutz Metser and the Arab village Messer, on whose land the kibbutz had been erected. Pinchas Cohen Gan worked in a refugee camp close to Jericho. This activism was art. In the late 1970s, the discourse of trauma in Israeli art became the discourse of a generation, a crossroads which brought together the difficulty in representing the trauma of war and the "crisis of representation" in Israeli as well as international art at the time. The Israeli rift, to which Reeb was a party, encountered the fissure caused by the collapse of modernism, and with it—the doubt regarding traditional art's ability to relate to reality, to go beyond the symbolic to the real.

Joseph Beuys, a great source of inspiration for the 1970s generation, eliminated the distinction between art and life, between the art object and political activism. German-American artist Hans Haacke, who expanded the artistic engagement with politics to the fields of ecology, economics, and the covert symbiosis between art, capital, and government, had great impact on Reeb too, as he had on other artists in those years. When Avital Geva constructed his ecologic-pedagogic hothouse in Kibbutz Ein Shemer, it was a direct continuation of his art, and an expression of the radical nature of the period. Years later, when Moshe Gershuni was denied the Israel Prize due to his refusal to shake hands with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, it was an event in the history of Israeli art. In 1978, as third year students at Bezalel, Reeb and his classmates covered the shop windows in the streets adjacent to the school with prints of fighting animals and soldiers shooting their rifles. The shopkeepers complained to the school management, and the matter even reached the police and the press. At the end of that year Reeb dropped out.

In 1983, when the IDF was deep in Lebanon and Israelis were prohibited

by law from maintaining any contact with the PLO, Reeb covered the bare wall spaces of the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion of Contemporary Art above and below his paintings with striped prints in blue, white, black, green, and red, as part of a two-person exhibition with Gabriel Klasmer, thereby transforming a colorful abstract pattern into a political statement.^{p. 124} Israel and Palestine “conversed” with each other. After former general Rehavam Ze’evi (“Gandhi”), the then director of Haaretz Museum, Tel Aviv (and subsequently a controversial right-wing politician), caused a fuss that reached the Knesset and the press, the Museum was pressured to close the show. Curator Sarah Breitberg-Semel was criticized. Ultimately, the exhibition was not closed, but production of the catalogue was canceled. This non-catalogue is also a part of the history of Israeli art.

Today, in retrospect, nobody questions whether those paintings featuring phantom fighter planes over Tel Aviv or the Bank Leumi logo are art or whether they are “beautiful.”^{pp. 99, 102} The concept of “art,” an ostensibly timeless category, has changed. These powerful paintings have forced a change on the viewer’s expectations and judgment. Today it is quite easy for us to take their contents in and enjoy Reeb’s vital painterliness. A painting, even when it is furious, offensive, or indifferent to beauty, always contains beauty. Reeb’s hand, even when it is fidgety or informative, is always touched by freshness and a childlike, playful spontaneity, lusting for touch. His painting always contains something seductive, sexy, as a part of its rhetoric. Bittersweet.

All traces of this sweetness dissolve in the videos. The pill is bitter, as the films expose, week in week out, the ongoing trauma of the occupation, the ongoing trauma of Israeli consciousness, the trauma as the routine of our being who and what we are. Reeb’s videos are possibly the crudest, most acerbic, unendurable body of work in the history of Israeli art. They defy all the laws of aesthetics. Once again we have to ask: Is this art? and the answer is: Yes, this is art, an extension of the notion of art or a protest against it. Concurrently, it is also a counter-argument inquiring: How can one create any other kind of art here in this place? How can “normal” art be created in this country, as if we were just another normal place where artists make art? The videos are the “refusal front”: the refusal of a normalizing routine, of normal art, of a consciousness that feels at home in Tel Aviv, with watermelon in hand watching the news on television.