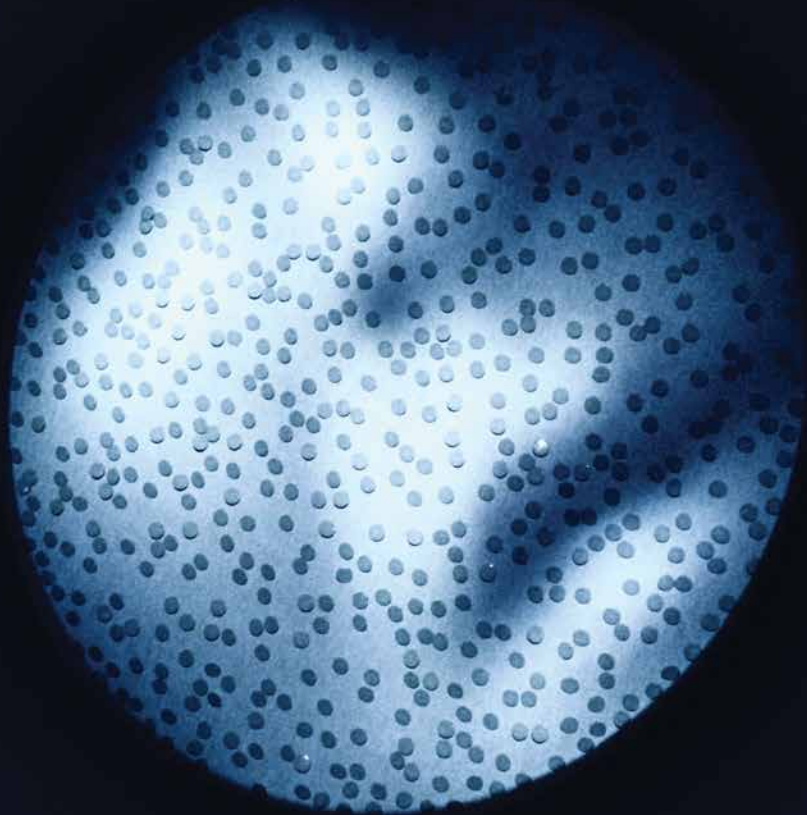
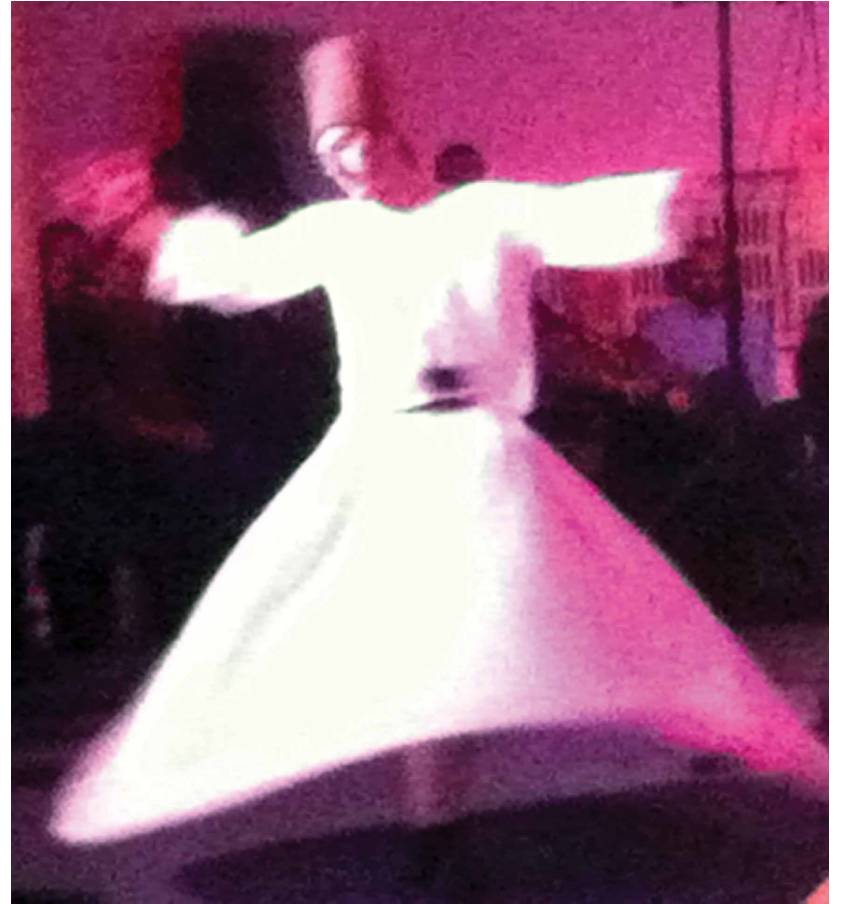
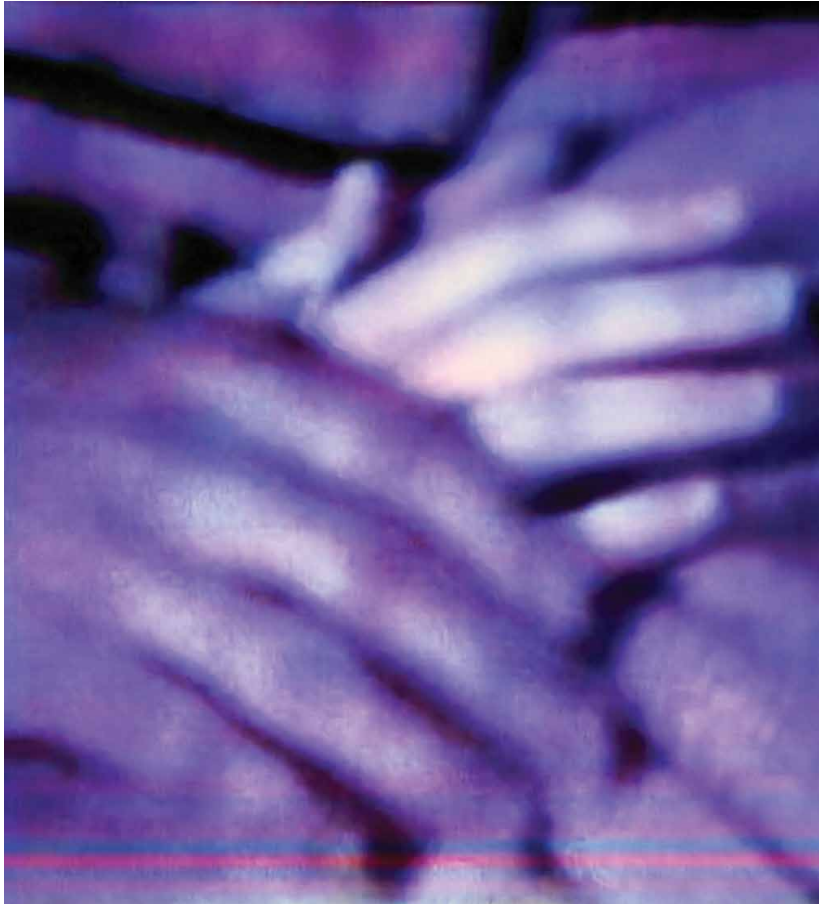


B.H. YAEL: FAMILY STATES











B.H. YAEL: FAMILY STATES

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INTRODUCTION

Mike Hoolboom

Whenever I see her she offers an easy-going warmth, as if welcome and hospitality was just part of the usual. Her smile is already the beginning of community, even as her work in video and multi-media installations are also sites of gathering, before and after production, in front of and behind the camera. Perhaps growing up with a multitude of brothers and sisters (not to mention three mothers) planted the seed? While too many artists map out a trajectory born of deep solitary, Yael has found her way in the company of others, even from her very beginnings as an artist, in the exhibition collective Spontaneous Combustion, a group that was determined to stage their practices in new spaces for new audiences.

If all of her works are investigations of control structures, she is equally determined to question and revise ideas of what documentary “should” look like. Reflexive, witty and heartbreaking, her movies are grounded in relationships and land, shifting identities and beauty. Like so many artists, these are also lessons in what freedom might look like if it was a question. She has absorbed the history of her medium, learned from its shortcomings and its unexpected gifts, and has found her own way, her own voice, in a continual gesture of reinvention.

This so-called mid-career artist has worked for more than three decades, creating 24 single-channel tapes, 10 installations and many community projects that have won numerous festival awards and have been widely collected by universities and art schools, though critical writing about her work, like too many media artists, has been intermittent.

This book is a community place where many writings ring out, each in their own way. It features the voices of fellow activists, friends and academics. Sometimes it relies on the kindness of strangers. These shifting points of view suggest that it might be possible to build groups out of our differences, that the fabled “multitude,” the voice of the undercommons, might be lit up by complexity, courage, poetry, engagement. And more.



photo by Mieke Van Geest



VIDEO

Oh Hell
w/ Joyce + Jimmy

OLAD List

Netflix List

Naomi B/day present

KITCHEN FLOOR

Kathy =
drop off seeds

WASKS

Vimeo uploads

PLASTIC REDUCTION

Edit memoir draft #2

Document #1's

pump bike tires

FILMS!

DISHES

JG - breakfast mark papers

10 AM
oops, forgot

WALK!

QUESTIONS
- on line teaching
- future predictions

PHOTOGRAPHS

FELTING WORKSHOP

Isolation A B C

MOVIES

Writing Group

query quer + campy

Lockdown Lists
- lay hose in garden
- laundry
- life lab apptm.
- LEAR

ALL

co-curricular ?

ZOOM

XEROTIC PLANTS

GRANTS

all right already!

COVID

CLOSETS

Extinction Rebellion

REBECCA
A. } call
B. }
G. }

A GREEN NEW DEAL FOR ALL

Bombs

BINGO
200M
w/ Rebecca, Naomi Isaac + Zoe

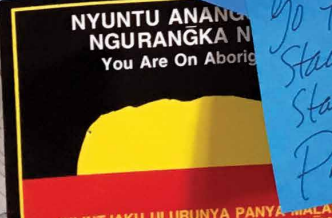
HAIR

house cleaning

Go through Stacks and Stacks of PAPER

SHED - clean

2020



UNDO CLIMA CRIS

Tires - change - call

Meditation Group 20 Sunday morn

Send links



BEST



KULINTAJUK ULURUNYA PANYA... MALAKUNGKU... NGKUNTJA 1985-ANGKA

YOU BELONG TO ME

video, 1986

Yann Beauvais

When watching the tape of b.h. Yael's *You Belong To Me* for the first time you feel a kind of awkwardness. It is triggered by the question of whether the fragmented images of body parts are appropriate, because they show a kind of taking over of a person.

Often a woman (but not only) is compelled to do something against her will, which she accomplishes using small, appropriated gestures. These signs of kindness are very often social subterfuges of control. They stage relations of power, which are underlined within the tape using strange framings, the isolation of details, fragmentation of an image within the frame, alteration of focus, zooming into the grain of the video.

A set of these gestures are sampled and repeated as visual motifs that evoke romance using social codes: offering flowers, taking an arm, stroke, kiss, etc. Each repetition induces an uneasiness that is enhanced by the words of the song we are hearing: "You belong to me." The words of the song instill malaise and strangeness.

When we see a longer scene with a naked hetero couple on a bed, this malaise does not dissolve but is still present, haunting this seemingly nice moment of kindness, to such an extent that it seems natural to have some of the previous sequences return in rapid flashes.

Another particularity of this tape is that it dialogues with contemporary work of the time made by male artists, such as Bruce Nauman's *Violent Incident*. But its feminism inscribes a rupture, and transcends the era in which it was made through its emphasis on the actual.



JAIN WALKS THE LINE

video, 1986

Deidre Logue

I had a dream last night that I had missed all my deadlines, so I crawled into a cardboard box (an Amazon delivery remnant) where I found a note that read *'your broke.'* The dream stuck with me for a few days and I began to worry. Was the *'your'* a possessive pronoun? Shouldn't it have been a contraction? If *your* is the second person possessive adjective, used to describe something as belonging to *you*, then does that make *'broke'* a noun or a verb? Then I thought to myself, who knows more about words and money than *your* old pal Jain?

Jain and I met in art school in 1986. The Soviet Nuclear reactor at Chernobyl had exploded and so had the Space Shuttle Challenger. The Iran-Contra Affair became public, the Oprah Winfrey Show debuted, the Human Genome project was initiated, a Casio Portable Color Television cost \$249.99 and I was 22.

Jain and I hit it off immediately, after what felt to me like a sort of longish 42 second introduction. This is important because we really only knew each other for about 5 minutes and 7 seconds. Dominating our conversations with unsound financial advice and primarily a terrible listener, Jain was also a very convincing person. But promises she made were pretty much broken before the end of a sentence and she was almost addicted to a deal!

One time Jain actually talked me—can you believe that, ME!!—into checking the mailboxes at the Browns, the Brewers and the Toths, running frantically between their houses, stark raving naked for a slim \$399.99 Canadian. After this stunt, just like after all of the other outrageous things she'd talk me into doing, I felt greedy and ashamed. Because as fun as it was, there was something sinister in my wheeling and dealing pal Jain, something cryptic, something cruel.

Our friendship only lasted an awkward 37 additional seconds, after which she abruptly died of an aneurysm. During the credits, I put a penny on her grave.



MY MOTHER IS A DANGEROUS WOMAN

video, 1987

Steve Reinke

How difficult it is to truly look at work—especially video art—from the 1980s, the cursed decade that (among many other more important things, I guess) relished being in the full bloom of postmodernism and took semiotics seriously. Especially video art, and especially video art like *My Mother is a Dangerous Woman*, which fits so squarely within the formal and thematic concerns of the day, it becomes truly difficult to make out, as if it were camouflaged by itself (which is, I guess, what camouflage does). What I mean to say is that so much of what is interesting in the work may seem today like simply the leftover style of an era that seems so much further away than it really is. That is, the danger is looking at the work and not seeing the work itself, but merely an example of a kind of work, an historically dubious or distasteful model.

1. The video begins with a single shot, a jerky zoom across a street—I assume it is a Toronto street with street cars, maybe Queen or College—and rests on the face of a woman carrying a bag of groceries from the IGA. The woman stands for the camera, looks into the lens: it turns out, this is not documentary, she is not being surveilled, but posed and framed. (We would have known this from the playful music, too.) A voice over asserts: *This is a dangerous woman. I know she doesn't look dangerous, but she is.*

Then, the title keyed over a freeze frame: *My Mother is a DANGEROUS Woman.*

In the following scene the camera is handheld, slowly going over some patches of a domestic space: images on the wall, dishes drying in the rack. We hear the sound of typing and this voice-over:

I started to write a story today. I wanted to write about a woman whose self-consciousness made her continually feel as if she was being watched. Someone's eyes were always upon her, and at times she found it comforting to know that she was being watched and performing well. But other times, she could not relax or be herself.



We do not know what is being typed. Is it the text we are being read? Or the abandoned text, ambiguously autobiographical, of a woman's alternating pleasure and anxiety in being interpellated by the gaze? Or is it a third text, the text she decides to turn to:

Somehow, I couldn't go any further. So instead I decided to write about Demeter.

We can't know what is being typed, of course. Each of the three options seems to me equally possible, as well as the possibility that nothing is being typed, that the sound effect is just used to evoke the space of writing. At this time, the space seems a narrative, diegetic space, the domestic space of the narrator, but as the video goes on, it becomes increasingly called into question what space, and what kind of space, we are in.

2. It is about three minutes into this incredibly dense work that we get the closest thing to an establishing shot: an overhead view of a woman typing at a (presumably her) kitchen table. We now have a body for the narrator's voice, and a place where that figure, our narrator dwells. I take this figure (writer), this place (their kitchen) and these sometimes and possibly coincident activities (writing and narrating) to be the core, the diegetic ground of the work, with the other types of "places," if not secondary, then rooted here, with our most solid representation of the artist/narrator.



They continue: I started writing a story again. A woman lived trying to savour each moment and story she had heard. Each person she had met. Increasingly she began to relate less and less to the world around her. Unable to take it all in, in her desire for truth and reality, she could only live one step removed from all that happened around her. What should I do with her? Should I leave her in her reverie? Should I make her come smack up against reality?

So not quite Demeter yet, though the search for Demeter becomes the dominant concern of the tape soon.

(Demeter was the Greek god of fertility, agriculture and the unwritten law of the divine order. Also: the cycle of life and death. This mother's daughter: Persephone, who was abducted into the underworld by Hades. Persephone's father, Zeus, gave Hades permission to marry her, but Demeter became distraught, searching endlessly. The seasons halted, everything on earth stopped growing and began to die. Faced with mass extinction, Zeus sent Hermes to the underworld to fetch Persephone. Hades said she could go if she had not eaten anything while in the underworld. But she'd ingested a few pomegranate seeds, so she was bound to return to Hades for a few months each year. Thus we have the seasons.)

How strange to search for Demeter! Demeter is the one who searches, Persephone the one sought. But in this work, as we'll see, mothers and daughters form a circuit, a continuum, not a pair but a chain in which positions shift.

3. Perhaps the types of scenes in *My Mother* that are most emblematic of the 80s are those that take place in the video studio. For the first two, a single character watches another character (all the characters are either mothers or daughters, or daughters masquerading as mothers) on a monitor in a studio, which is darkened. The sound comes from the monitor, and the light too (it looks like). The monitor images are usually domestic: mother in the kitchen, chopping, giving advice. The studio image (which includes the monitor image) has a character watching and listening.

When I was getting married, my mother told me that it was important to let the husband be the head of the household. She said the wife still has a lot of power, but it's important to make the man believe he is the head. You know, she was right. The male ego is a very fragile thing, and we must take good care of it.

This forms a mise en abyme: a layering of spaces, of voices, of positions; the layering put into a circuit, a feedback loop with the possibility of endless watching, while we have the possibility of endlessly watching those being watched, and having us both watch (and listen to) the watched, the watching and their endless circuit.



4. These video studio mise en abymes become more complex as the video continues. In one, the monitor image is a child against a chromakey green background, looking up and talking. The studio image shows the mother, preparing a salad using the monitor as a table, looking down and continuing the conversation. Today we might be inclined to dismiss this as a lame kind of theatricality, a mixing of the video and the theatrical just because one could, and presumably because it would have impressed, looked cool, back in the day. But this would miss the possibilities that this layering of electronic spaces has, its power to reroute voices and positions, to form circuits and feedback loops that both dissolve and multiply subjectivities. Subjectivities, affects, positions: whatever you want!

5. Why not include the rest of the Demeter monologues? They're good, and may not be in print elsewhere. The final monologue turns away from Demeter, and also comically from the lofty goals the narrator originally stated. But note that this seeming deflation ends with another possibly endless circuit.

I started to write about a woman, again. Instead of being watched, she started watching—TV, that is. And whenever a great TV offer came on, she would send for one right away. Soon she had a collection of Elvis tapes, Broadway hits, handy dandy kitchen knives, easy irons, Veg-O-Matics, knife sharpeners, everything and anything. She would send for them all and sometimes she would forget she had sent for something and would send for it again.

My Mother is a Dangerous Woman moves from the space of writing (not the space of literature, or the space of the written, but the space of writing as an activity and its performance) through to the mise en abyme of video flows and endlessly mirrored gazes/echoing voices. Between these two spaces lie many possibilities (still largely unexplored) for extending literature through media.



FRESH BLOOD

Video, 1996.

Cameron Bailey

Originally published in Now Magazine September 19-25, 1996

Mixing interviews, travel footage and bits of text from the postcolonial star scene, *Fresh Blood* offers up a picture of Israel rarely seen here—lesbians who riff on the butch kibbutzim look, communities of Arab and African Jews, and Israel’s only professional male belly dancer. Wende Bartley’s blend of Arab and Jewish rhythms stitches the hybrid together, nicely reflecting the irresolvable contradictions of a real life.

Toronto video artist b.h. Yael is in the midst of exacting a thoughtful revenge. Having grown up buffeted by forces that demanded tribute from her as a girl, as a daughter, as a Jew, she’s decided that ideas are the best payback. Her smart, hybrid work to date reflects the heat of the battle—*Is Dad Dead Yet?*, *My Mother Is a Dangerous Woman*. Now, with *Fresh Blood*, she’s shifted the theatre to the quiet little nation of Israel.

In the tape, Yael travels east with her mother and sister to reconstruct a personal history piece by piece. She visits her grandmother, tracks down her biological father and interviews culture outlaws like Arab-Jewish theorist Ella Shohat. On a family journey that takes in both documentary and fantasy, Yael looks at notions of female identity and Jewishness that fray at the edges.

“There’s an entrenched need within Israel, and also with Jewish culture here, to totally deny that the majority of Jews in Israel are Arab Jews.” Partly as a result, she admits, “I don’t feel very connected to North American Jewish culture at all. I don’t think a lot of North American Jews even think about this. There’s a racialized identity in terms of Jew versus non-Jew, and there’s a racialized issue within Jewishness—the Sephardi or Mizrahi versus the Ashkenazy, black versus white. There isn’t very much acknowledgement within Jewish culture about those kinds of splits. People just maintain their distances.”



Sitting in an Indian restaurant on Queen Street gives an ironic punch to the conversation. Yael continues. “Israel is such a strange mix of East and West. Because it’s both a military culture and an agrarian culture, women are soldiers, women are farmers. They take on roles that men would more often take on here. And yet there’s a huge imposition of femininity. My mother grew up on a kibbutz, but she wanted to be a model. That came out of a schism between what she was and the idealized femininity she aspired to.

It’s such a small country, only five million people, and yet it holds such a variety of positions around which women are situated. You see the black hats and the Lubavitch women being confined in their roles, and you see women serving in the army and working the fields, and you see Arab women who wear the hijab. It’s a place where you see all these discourses right on the street.”

Capturing that mix demanded the tool-kit style Yael always brings to her work. Forget generic consistency. Documentary realism, reimagined memories, art-video text-on-screen—it’s all part of the plan.

“The hybrid forms gives me more flexibility,” says Yael. “It allows me to include my own perspectives, other people’s perspectives, my fantasies, my analysis, all of it.”

For the interviews “I had a little Hi-8 camera on a Steadicam Junior, so it wasn’t in front of the face, it was down on the hip. And it created a different relationship to being shot, to the person shooting. Even when I was on my own with the camera, I could still have a presence in the scene. I could still make eye contact, we could still talk. The camera wasn’t right between us.”

Yael insists she rarely turns a camera on her family unless she’s making a specific tape, but being with them, for better and worse, has been crucial to her work.

“My experience within family politics has been a confused and mired one,” she admits. “What I did with the tape is concentrate on my first several years, and on going back to Israel. But my earliest tapes came out of subsequent experience when my mom had remarried and I had a stepfather who was quite authoritarian. We grew up in a Christian household and—I haven’t dealt with this in a public way, but I’d like to in another piece.”

The verbal violence of her work’s titles, she says, comes from “seeing the politics of these adults, and from my struggle with someone who demanded obedience and whom I resented a lot.”

Tackling Jewish identity for the first time in so direct a manner raises new questions for Yael that go beyond her immediate family. Coming out in public may mean being claimed or interrogated in unpleasant ways.

“I’m hoping there’ll be some interrogation. It’s the claiming I have more fear of,” she laughs. “Someone suggested I should premiere it at the Jewish Film Festival. I said no way. I wanted it to be situated in a piece around identity, and it happens to take its specificity from Jewishness. But I don’t totally claim that, either. I know I want the piece to enter places where Jews do consider their relationship to Israel, and what their identification is within North America, especially around racialized identity. I would hope it’s used in that way. But yeah, I don’t want to be a big Jew either.”



FRESH BLOOD

video, 1996

Dalia Kandiyoti

Watching *Fresh Blood* during the spring of 2020 brings home the past in multiple ways, dispatching me to the 1990s when, like the writing of Ella Shohat, Yael's video became part of my introduction to work about Arab Jews, a term I had heard only in reference to the Halabis (Aleppans) I had known in Turkey. Focusing my teaching and writing on politicised belonging, but not my own identities, I was drawn to the boldness of first-person work like *Fresh Blood* and especially the wider strokes with which Yael painted the supposedly incongruous experience of the Middle Eastern Jew. In undergraduate courses in New York and Toronto on contemporary migration narratives and Jews of the Middle East and Latin America, I presented *Fresh Blood*, hoping that something of the sweep of millennial Babylonian Jewry; its tragic exodus following Zionism and the Farhud; and ongoing non-arrivals, would serve to familiarize and de-exoticize Judeo-Muslim cultures and their dispersions. Through our other texts and in their own lives, students were also engaging with issues of gender, homophobia, racialization, and Israel/Palestine. The video "fit," ironically, into our discussions of not "fitting," and its drastic consequences. As I opened a new tab to watch *Fresh Blood* again, I remembered that during the first year I showed it, my students skipped class to attend the protests following the murder of Amadou Diallo. I kept open the other tabs, many of them news about the demos protesting the murder of George Floyd.

Watching *Fresh Blood* now visualizes how much worse things have become in Israel/Palestine since the 1990s, and how the imaginary lines in the sand drawn by nationalism and racialization are now even more lethal globally. Perhaps because the thought of this is too difficult despite the extraordinary current uprising, I focus on other details: three generations of women giggling in nightgowns as Arabic is mispronounced; the beautiful queerness of the male belly-dancing at a heterosocial gathering; the final utopian dance of the joyful, motley crew. We had concentrated on "the conflicts" with my students and less on the sensuous, the bodily, the intimate. I revel in hearing different versions of the classic song



Zarani al Mahboub, a muwashah Andalousi I learned ten years ago; try to sense the brimstone and the light in Sodom, which Yael crosses as she also parses homophobia for her mother; listen to the striking words of the activist Nabila Espanioly and note the vitality and power bursting from her eyes. I wince at the loss of common language between grandmother and granddaughter, father and daughter, displaced in different worlds. Other details are startling, though passed over briefly in the narrative, which I had missed or did not remember, partly because Yael's family story contains exceptional multitudes: her Polish father had been a refugee in Tehran (I learned only more recently about the Jewish refuge in Iran); Yael says she was *stolen* as a child from this father when her mother and stepfather moved her to Canada without permission. These quick stories are just as jolting as Espanioly's startling explanations about Arab Jews: they are not only like the enemy, she says, but are their own enemies. They make me wonder about Yael's voiceover, which reconstructs and dismantles the past without a hint of rancor. She talks in even tones over the dream-like music and images of self-conscious undulations to Arabic songs. Because it's my forte, I read pain between her lines, which do not divulge any.

A quarter century ago, I framed *Fresh Blood* as a cultural and political document and an essay on identity, one reflecting on the self, the collective, and History through counter-memory, the fragmentation of time, and the dismantling of the idea that return entails recovery. Yael's grappling with her own past was a portal to larger narratives of displacements, underscored by the promise to write history from below.

We know that uncovering history's omissions does not repair the present; even if repeating those crimes is the goal of power. Nevertheless, we still hunger to learn, recast, and disseminate the past, which survives not only in "evidence"—the footage, the document—but also in touching diasporic intimacies, the affect of "experts" (including the brilliant young Ella Shohat), the poignancy of broken and remade people and families. Yael's own losses loom as large as her generous smile lightens difficult encounters. Made in a period that valorized the transition from silence to speech, from the hidden to the visible, *Fresh Blood* reminds me that there is a world within the unspoken, with its own diffuse power and seeping effect on our grasp of the past.



SELDOM

video, 2000

Mike Hoolboom

The opening image, let's call it the frame, offers a portent of what is to come. The artist appears in extreme close up, biting her finger, looking off camera. It's an image of apprehension, ill at ease. The picture asks: what's wrong?

A rush of memories ensue. As the artist washes herself (what can be removed? what can't?), her body mixes with old growth forests, the foggy highways and stone walls north of San Francisco (an echo of the "security fence" between Palestine and Israel?), camels bearing loads for travellers, a steep set of stairs descending in Jerusalem. If the film jogs between the artist's body and the bodies of the world, the camera is also an alternating current. It moves slowly and carefully across its subject, or else careens wildly, as if every compass had been abandoned. A disoriented delirium. Where am I is also a way of asking: who am I?

This lyric travelogue is also a search for roots, a place to call home. The Hassidic Jew glimpsed in Jerusalem has "come home" because the architecture of state has been built to accommodate him. But what of those who have no right of return? The Palestinians most obviously, but also the artist herself, displaced, caught between countries, between her mother's Iraqi-Israeli roots and her Canadian upbringing.

Finally the stone walls turn into the rubble of the Middle East. The promised garden is a desert. The artist sits alone on a Georgian beach at the Atlantic Ocean still eating chips as before, but changed now, marked by the land. The shower has turned into an ocean as she embraces the fragments that live inside, at least for now, temporarily.



THE LONELY LESBIAN

video, 2002

Ali Kazimi

New York City has a buzz unlike any other place I have travelled to; it is palpable when you emerge into the heart of the city from a subway station; the experience, at times exhilarating, alienating, or as in the case of the lead character in *The Lonely Lesbian*, filled with a sweet melancholy.

In the first minute, b.h. Yael deftly introduces us to the title character (played by Marilyn Lerner who also did the sound and music performance) emerging from the frenetic energy of the iconic subway system into a hot, lassitude-filled afternoon on Wall Street, lugging a large vintage leather suitcase. Dynamically fluid handheld close ups of the character's enigmatic face are intercut with swish pans and tilts across the urban landscape that surround her. She is not lost but we sense an anticipation, a yearning for an arrival, for a connection that remains unrequited. We see her heading off across a bridge, her suitcase now seems heavier, she leans to her right to counter the heaviness of her baggage. What is in the suitcase, where is she going?

She arrives at a quiet beach. A change in the beautifully layered soundscape is marked by the sound of waves, heard before they are seen. In another beautifully crafted montage, accompanied by accentuated, hyperreal sounds, she clicks open the latches and unveils the contents of her bag—a well-used accordion. With a hint of a smile she walks to the edge of the water and plays a klezmer-infused melody while looking across the Atlantic. A child's laughter is heard cutting through the waves and the accordion; in a few short minutes we have been on an inner journey, a visual and sonic poem deceptively simple, yet open to be completed by the inner life of its viewers.



TRISKAIDEKAPHOBIA

video, 2003

Niko Block

Like much of Yael's work *Triskaidekaphobia* is about her family, but in focusing on her kid rather than her parents, it is possibly the lightest of her films. Commissioned and screened by the Inside Out Festival, its original objective was to depict a thirteen-year-old's take on homophobia—where it comes from and how it manifests. There are a few mundane insights that I stammered out about this, but then I listed other phobias I had just read about (presumably on the fledgling internet) including the fear of the number thirteen. Yael's ears pricked up at this given my recent bar mitzvah. In the Jewish tradition, the celebration of a thirteenth birthday marks the transition into adulthood. My upbringing was very secular, but romantic visions of adolescence inevitably linger over anyone's childhood, with teens being played by thirty-year-olds in everything from *Grease* to *Saved by the Bell*. Once you get there, as I shruggingly tried to say on camera, both the anxieties and excitement dissolve amidst the important lesson that transformative moments are in fact rare, unforeseeable, and subtle.

Still, though I was so young that my teeth looked too big for my face, it is also true that I was settling into my own permanent interests at the time. My investment in struggles for political justice had recently begun as I became engaged in the antiwar movement—so engaged that I had a peace sign imprinted in my hairdo, and another one inexplicably done in a henna tattoo on my earlobe. Certainly the pattern of bickering and button pushing between Yael and I was also entering its current phase. Even my goofy outfit as I trundle miserably into school in one scene speaks to my persisting attempts to present as both a punk and an intellectual.

The other reason triskaidekaphobia became an object of fascination in our conversation is that it seems, at face value, so obscure that it hardly deserves a word of its own. Yet today it strikes me that triskaidekaphobia has greater institutional acceptance than homophobia, given the number of buildings that skip the thirteenth floor. This points to Yael's strategy of discussing phobias in such general terms, which shows homophobia to be as superstitious and arbitrary as any other phobia.



THE FEAR SERIES

wearable art and installation, 2005

b.h. Yael

There was a moment in the wake of the second intifada, the attack on the World Trade towers in New York, and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, when selling and wearing buttons in support of Palestine was a flashpoint in Toronto. For example a University of Toronto professor tried to instigate a boycott of the Women's Bookstore for selling such buttons.

In *the fear series*, buttons declare "i am full of fear" in very subtle tones, such that a reader must enter a wearer's personal space to be able to read the button, which functions as wearable art. The buttons speak to that which is not clearly articulated and the difficulty of addressing the larger context of fear, be it personal or political.

In the installations, four circular, sometimes impressionistic images are projected onto hundreds of buttons that function as both screen and reflection, creating many points of light. The first projected image, *offering*, shows a woman treading water. Images 2, 3 & 4 (*clarity*, *inheritance* and *journey*) were made a couple of years later. *clarity* is a slowed image of a man pulling a gun on me in the market place of Suk Shorgia, in Baghdad. I had traveled to my mother's birthplace with a peace delegation. The image points to the lawlessness of Baghdad after the American invasion. It is the camera that the assailant is after; it may be that the camera is also an assailant. *journey* is a close-up image of a female face (mine) slightly out of focus, flushed, suggesting pain or pleasure. *inheritance* documents three Israeli soldiers at the Damascus gate in Jerusalem.

Fear enters our bodies, our daily interactions. The personal declaration of owning fear is a powerful context, however we may not want to state it too loudly.



EVEN IN THE DESERT

video, 2006

Lia Tarachansky

In 2014 I left Israel/Palestine after working as a journalist and documentary filmmaker for several years. Though I grew up there, it wasn't until I was an adult that I stepped across the wall and witnessed the Occupation. I interviewed the best minds and those on the front line and even though it seemed like nothing was changing, I witnessed so much change. I picked up enough Arabic to understand which minibus could get me to any village, hospital, cemetery and town. There were weeks when all I did was cover funerals. The chaotic checkpoints were turned into permanent border crossings that boasted watchtowers, snipers, barbed wire and the ever-present screech of an impatient soldier screaming incoherent instructions. The young no longer spoke about what party they joined, but what country they'd applied to leave to. The peace talks became negotiations about "the management of the conflict."

2014 began with so much hope. It seemed that leaders of Palestine's two major political parties— Hamas and Fatah— would set aside their long feud and join a unity government. Instead, their reconciliation blew up.

Three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and murdered and in revenge a Palestinian teenager was kidnapped and murdered. If you follow the conflict you'll remember this moment, but on the ground it felt different.

The government knew the three Israeli teenagers were dead but refused to make the news public. Instead, it recruited their parents into a shameless propaganda tour, rallying the nation in support of the regime. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's mouthpieces kept saying that they were just around the corner. We are closing in. We will find them. When their bodies were uncovered a dam burst. Hateful demonstrations flooded Israeli streets demanding blood, and blood was drawn, both by vigilantes and the government.

The brutal bombardment of the Gaza Strip and the wave of destruction that swept over the West Bank that summer felt different. I can't describe



the feeling nor would I ever want you to know, if you don't already, the burning sensation of thick dread pouring down your throat like oil. Each morning felt like waking into a silent scream, your face distorted and stretched, but your spirit withholding your voice. On the phone with reporters in Gaza I heard a fear I'd never heard before. "We are all targets," I remember my 21-year-old Gazan colleague tell me during a particularly desperate call in August. "They want us all dead."

As an Israeli who worked in the Palestinian territories covering the Occupation, I was acutely conscious of my affiliation with the brutality of the regime. As a Canadian, I was also aware of the document in my back pocket that could take me out of this country, permanently if I so choose. When I work I try to remember that I am not only my privilege, that I am also a person and a professional. My job is not about offering comfort to my readers. I don't have that right. My job is to listen, document, expose, publish. My job is to ignore the dread and keep going.

When I started writing about the Occupation in 2005, I wrote out of rage and indignation. As an undergraduate student in Canada, I was challenged by Jewish activists and a steady stream of documentaries, fiction films, books, and journalism that made the Occupation impossible to deny. I can imagine you pausing on that word—deny—with astonishment. Perhaps you're right, it was never deniable, certainly not

for those who live it, but as a Soviet-born, Jewish immigrant to Israel, I was brought up inside a different frame. I had come of age in a matrix of obfuscations, illusions, and what today appear as extravagant lies, but any justification can gain legitimacy if it plugs into your desires.

I grew up in a settlement in the heart of the West Bank, yet I lived like millions of Israelis in a constructed space, a landscape poured into contrived narratives held together with duct tape. That same year, 2005, b.h. Yael's *Palestine Trilogy* was filmed and released. I don't remember where I first saw it, but I distinctly remember the sensation of being thrown into crisis, like a raw piece of meat dumped into a stew. Here were the same familiar roads I had travelled countless times, now clogged arteries in a network of dead ends, fenced walls, and checkpoints. Here were the nameless villages I would pass, sitting in the back of my mother's car, now named and placed pointedly on a map I, amazingly, had never seen before. Here were people, no longer silent, speaking clearly and directly, leading the way. They were addressing an audience I had never been part of before, and they spoke about atrocities I could not reconcile with the memories I carried of what I had always thought of as my home. My land. Mine. Their words rose up out of the blacked-out spaces I had never thought to enter, asking questions I was wholly incapable of answering. They left pauses where my response and actions might be made.

The actions Yael documented became guidelines and a few years later the people she interviewed welcomed me into their lives when I became a journalist. My soundscape was soon stacked with reports, news items, frantic phone calls and interviews. My visualscape was reframed by electric fences, press releases, and pixelated drone footage.

When I left Palestine, I couldn't imagine that I would still be away six years later. The quiet of Canadian snowfalls became too welcome, the news became harder to look at. The choice not to know was accompanied by the guilt of not listening, looking, acting. I wasn't doing my job.

Before COVID-19 shut me into my apartment in Toronto, b.h. Yael's *Palestine Trilogy* reappeared in my inbox like a silent gas grenade. Mike Hoolboom was editing a book of essays about her work and asked me to write about the *Trilogy*. I read the email, then clicked "return" and remarked it "unread." I did that about a dozen times because the email kept showing up in my inbox, nagging at me. I started dreaming about it. It invaded the unbearably quiet moments of quarantined winter days. I

replied, hoping my response would buy me an extended back-and-forth or some clarity as to what the hell I could possibly say about these images, these interviews, these declarations of human rights violations from 2005. The Bedouin women of Susya were leading Yael through the caves where they had lived and from which they were expelled by armed soldiers. I filmed those same caves only a few years later, interviewed the same women, thanked them, like Yael did, for taking the time.



I also filmed Ezra Nawi and countless other Jewish and Israeli activists who have dedicated their lives to solidarity work with Palestinians. I, too, animated UN maps of segregated villages and dug up the growing statistics of demolished Palestinian homes. And yet it took me months to muster the courage to rewatch Yael's film. To staple myself to a chair and receive again the atrocities of 15 years ago.

In 2015, Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions co-founder Jeff Halper toured Canada, speaking about his proposal for a one-state solution. While touring, Halper also fundraised money to rebuild the Fhadat family home in Anata, not far from Jerusalem. While it is only one of the nearly 50,000 homes Israeli bulldozers have demolished, it is an action of direct resistance that opposes the state's ethnic cleansing. As Halper says, "We have built 189 homes in the past 15 years. These are 189 joint actions of Israeli, Palestinian and international activists working

together.” While the Fhadats opened their doors to solidarity, Beit Arabiya, the home Yael filmed and where she interviewed Halper in *Even In The Desert*, was demolished to make way for a checkpoint.

The village of Susya, whose Bedouin cave-dwellers Yael interviewed, was demolished many times since 2005, but recently I filmed a brand new organization, the Centre for Jewish Non-Violence, taking up the solidarity work against the Jewish National Fund. A major enactor of Israeli colonialism, the JNF uses its environmental mandate to disguise its involvement in the demolition and erasure of hundreds of Palestinian villages. In Canada, activists have joined a global campaign against the JNF’s century-long involvement in the displacement of Palestinians. They have garnered endorsements from prominent figures such as Noam Chomsky, Richard Falk, Diana Butt, and a slate of Canadian politicians who introduced an official petition to Parliament. In 2017 they filed an extensive complaint with the Canada Revenue Agency, demanding JNF’s international branch, through which it does much of its fundraising, lose its charitable status in Canada.

In Canada I’ve met dedicated solidarity activists who not only set out to take a principled stand, but have enacted change that has direct, concrete impact in Israel/Palestine. Getting the JNF’s charitable status revoked would impact the organization’s bottom line to the tune of millions of dollars. Those are millions that won’t support the demolition of Bedouin villages in the Negev Desert such as Al Araqib. Millions that won’t go towards building roads and resting areas for the Israeli army’s beautified bases, nor help erase the traces of the Nakba. This is where we’ve seen the most significant progress.

Israel’s failure to abide by the Oslo Agreement and return control of the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority, has meant that the land where a Palestinian state was promised has been stolen by Israel. With this annexation, legalized this year by the Israeli government, the so-called Two-State Solution was formally cancelled.

When the hope for Palestinian nationhood was snuffed out, fundamental questions were raised about the colonial nature of Israel’s relationship to Palestine. As the map in *Even In The Desert* shows, in its transformation from a spiritual movement into a political one in the 19th century, Zionism became a colonial force. Dozens of scholars have

unearthed historical evidence of the mass displacement of two-thirds of Palestine’s inhabitants, an outcome of Israel’s founding that Zionism’s apologists claim was incidental rather than intentional and systematic.

In February a remarkable biography of political Zionism’s founding father Theodor Herzl was published by Canadian historian Dr. Derek Penslar. In *Theodor Herzl: The Charismatic Leader* (2020, Yale University Press), he writes: “Herzl enthusiastically supported European colonialism. In 1898, during a public debate about Zionism in Berlin, Herzl said: ‘Don’t you know what a colonial age we are living in? As a consequence of overpopulation, and of the resultant ever more acute Social Question (European anti-semitism), many nations are endeavoring to found overseas colonies in order to channel the flow of immigration back. This is the policy which England has been pursuing for decades, and which has been regarded as exemplary by many nations. I believe that Germany, too, has taken steps to become a Greater Germany, since it has looked across the seas and has striven to found colonies everywhere.’” (P.138).

Understanding Canada as a settler-colonial society opens the door to deeper investigations into Canadian Confederation, into Israel/Palestine’s one-state solution, and all other national arrangements. It raises fundamental questions I must now ask as a settler in Canada/Turtle Island; questions about Indigeneity and decolonization, transforming the current dynamic of subjugation into one of integration. This October a new initiative will launch in Berlin, the one place outside Palestine where talk of Palestine is hardest. Called “The School for Unlearning Zionism,” it will for the first time present in a comprehensive and complex way the unsettling process of coloniality in relation to Israel/Palestine, the unlearning we must all do as settlers in order to listen, see, transform, and undo.

DEIR YASSIN REMEMBERED

video, 2006

Robert Massoud

Much of the film and video work of b.h. Yael revolves around Israel-Palestine. It's never an easy subject, always fraught with potholes and missteps. Yael handles them well thanks to a very human viewpoint informed by her many identities: she is artist, activist and participant-victim. It is this last relationship that makes her offering different and even exceptional for its sensitivity and depth.

Israel-Palestine is a place of many memories and long memory. Many would say this is the problem but it can also be the key to a resolution. Yael's work has always struck me as being about the pain and necessity of remembering in order to heal and move forward. This unifying theme is captured most clearly in the 2006 documentary *Deir Yassin Remembered*.

Commissioned by an association named Deir Yassin Remembered, based in Geneva, NY, Yael visits the site and explores the memory of one of the most infamous incidents of the Nakba. The twelve months of 1948 are called the Nakba (catastrophe in Arabic) by Palestinians when 750,000 were ethnically cleansed and 600 towns and villages were destroyed by Zionist forces. This was the heavy cost to the Palestinian people that led to the creation of Israel as a Jewish state. It also extinguished the Palestinian state recommended by the UN Partition Plan for Palestine. Many historians and analysts judge the massacre at Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948 as a major turning point in the struggle for Palestine. It was the most dramatic and well-known of the 30+ massacres in that time, when hundreds of Palestinian women and children were butchered as a way to terrorize others to leave Palestine.

The documentary opens with an eyewitness account by a grandmother who remembers that day as a young 20-year-old mother. Her two children and husband were among 37 family members killed at Deir Yassin. This witnessing is accompanied by a visual of swirling land underfoot amid the sound of traffic. Memory struggles to make sense of the past as an uncaring present whizzes by.



Deir Yassin is one of the very few Palestinian villages kept intact from 1948. Today its buildings house a mental health center and facilities. Its Palestinian origins and termination are erased from the present—hidden in plain sight. Its ignored and walled-up cemetery lacks an entrance yet retains a quiet dignity. It is an example of Israel's paradoxical and bureaucratic category for Palestinians remaining in Israel: "Present Absentees." Memory absent from the present.

I have a personal connection to Deir Yassin. When I was 13 or 14 my mother told me about the massacre. I shouted her down most cruelly because I did not believe her, as this was not what I learned from school or the culture around me. This was in 1970s Montreal when Israel and Zionism was dominant and awareness of the Palestinian story nonexistent. It was pre-internet and pre-Wikipedia and there was no way for a young boy to find out. To this day I am ashamed that I denied my mother's memory and story.

The *Deir Yassin Remembered* documentary is part of Yael's Palestine Trilogy, made in 2006. Taken together, each looks at the same subject from slightly different perspectives. They all share in the mood captured by the words in the opening frames of *A hot sandfilled wind*: "The ground is haunted." If this is true then the mind and spirit must also be haunted.

Why is this so important to Yael? What motivates her art and activism? Is it her life and past? Much of Yael's art, if not autobiographical, explores aspects drawn from her lived experience.

I'm not an artist myself but as an activist I see a parallel between us. Yael and I share a sense of being haunted. I'm a Palestinian, born inside Israel, who grew up in Canada. Yael was also born in Israel, but with Jewish parents uprooted from Iraq and Poland, and she also grew up in Canada. Maybe Yael feels it more, I was displaced once from Palestine but she was displaced twice; first from her Iraqi-Mizrahi roots and then from the Israel paradise promised to Jews living in Arab countries.

We share the same sense of loss and uprootedness, of injustice and injury. We deal with it differently—she in her visual essays and me by founding Zatoun, bringing fair trade Palestinian olive oil as a way to connect North Americans with Palestine. Yael was one of the first people to engage with and promote Zatoun even before the first bottles appeared in spring 2004. Beginning in 2010, I operated Beit Zatoun in Toronto for seven years as a meeting space and performance centre for the grassroots community to explore the interplay of art, culture and politics.

Courageous individuals who have thought long and hard about Israel and Palestine know the many deadly ironies and contradictions that surround its past and present. Perhaps the supreme paradox is memory—how it can be both a prison and the ticket to get out from that prison.

The entire thrust of Palestine solidarity, as with the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement, is to acknowledge the past so that we can move towards justice and peace. This is best captured by Zochrot, the most steadfast, effective and long-standing Jewish solidarity group in Israel. Not surprisingly, its name in Hebrew means “remembering,” and its slogan is “To commemorate, witness, acknowledge, and repair.” Yael does that in her filmmaking.

Deir Yassin Remembered makes a clear call for commemoration so that Israel-Palestine can move towards a future of human dignity for all. In a time of awakening to the damage caused by monuments to oppression and injustice, we begin to understand that memory can be repurposed for good. Calling for courageous education instead of glorification by myth-making or denial through ignorance, we may have a chance at justice and peace. The films of Yael, like all responsible art, contribute to healing and freeing the producer-artist as much as the consumer-viewer.



DEIR YASSIN UNREMEMBERED

text, 2020

Vimeo Staff

Hello b.h. Yael,

Your video “PALESTINE TRILOGY: Deir Yassin Remembered” has been removed for violating our Guidelines.

Reason: You cannot upload videos that are hateful or that incite hatred against any individual or group.

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Sincerely,
Vimeo Staff

PALESTINE TRILOGY

Video, 2006

Nadia Habib

Time defies a sense of purpose in this of moment of isolation, collective grief and anxiety. I sit to reflect on Yael's *Palestine Trilogy* at a time when we are censured for saying *Palestine* and the Ontario Government adopts the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition of anti-semitism (without judicial process) that criminalizes any criticism of Israel. I reflect on the *Trilogy's* refusal to relinquish what Viktor Frankl has called: a tragic optimism to document dispossession, solidarity and hope. To bear witness, softly, to this land that stings with the hot sandfilled winds of struggle and its disavowals.

Deir Yassin Remembered

Where they paved over the bones of the dead and in their place a structure for madness because forgetting and disavowal are not the same thing.

The time I went to Israel/Palestine and asked an Israeli man, "What is that area called that sits on top of the hill in the distance?" I wanted to know how he would characterize the settlement. "Oh, that's just a suburb of Jerusalem."

Yael's documents have a soft gaze. Putting the three pieces of *Palestine Trilogy* together: In *Even in the Desert* "you can find small, nice flowers, whether images or text." *A hot sandfilled wind* haunts *Deir Yassin Remembered*, bookends with no end in sight. "Deir Yassin marks a beginning of the Nakba."

Yes, the Nakba for Palestinians was significant. It means "the disaster;" it's the moment when they lost their lands and many became refugees. At the same time, Israelis celebrate independence, getting the land. Israel does not want to acknowledge the previous inhabitants. What's happened in the last number of years is that the state has created laws so that Palestinians are not allowed to commemorate the Nakba within Israel; it's an attempt to criminalize memory. It has been legally entrenched: flying the Palestinian flag or talking about the trauma and rupture that Palestinians experience is now illegal. Of course, people break that law, including Israelis. The Israeli organization Zochrot (it's a feminine word for remembering) deliberately speaks about the Nakba to Israelis. It's important



*for Israelis to acknowledge that this happened—that this disaster is part of our narrative, and to try and educate Israelis about the many villages that were destroyed and disappeared and about those who were on the land previously.*¹

Like the people of this land on which Yael and I both live, their dispossessions and its disavowals, relocated to smaller and smaller plots, reserves, territories, status cards and laissez-passer permissions to tread on what settlers have appropriated—no one benefits.

We need to deal with this, with what happened in the Palestinian Nakba: the expulsions, the massacres, the ethnic cleansing, and so on. We will not be able to live here in peace, never. It's a continuous tragedy. The Nakba is not something that happened and that's it. It continues running our life. (Eitan Bronstein, Deir Yassin Remembered) As Patrick Wolfe reminds us: settler colonialism is a structure, not an event.

Hers is a trilogy of refusal—refusing to forget, refusing to be silenced, refusing the bitter narratives—still laden with its costs—the winds of dispossession and disavowal and their sting. *I don't know if I'm speaking now about Deir Yassin, or I'm speaking about Kafir Qasim, or I'm speaking about Tantura. (Nabila Espanioly, Deir Yassin Remembered)*

¹b.h. Yael, in "Land Project: A Conversation between Canada and Israel/Palestine," Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Joseph Naytowhow, and b.h. Yael, in DeGagné, Mike., et al. *Cultivating Canada Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*. Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011, pp. 46-47.

These documents are quiet, their gaze is soft but they are tenacious, their steadfastness broken only by the shrill cry of the other's death wish. *Kill the Arabs. Kill the Arabs. Kill the Arabs. (Even in the Desert)* The images, text and voice-over are resolute. We are led to hold each other's hand in and through these documents—a sustained solidarity.

We decide to stay and keep the camera running. Our presence clearly irritates the soldiers. Eventually they give the Palestinians their ID cards back and allow them to leave. (Even in the Desert)

When memory is made to disappear. Just tell them our story.

While making our way to a conference in East Jerusalem, a colleague and I were detained for hours after crossing the Allenby Bridge, before being let into Israel/Palestine. I imagined that because I had traveled extensively in parts of the Middle East, I would be able to manage. My colleague had not travelled much outside of North America, and I was concerned about what seemed to me to be her naive questions.

Initially I had thought that once we got past the border, I would easily find us a taxi to take us to the hotel in East Jerusalem. There were hours of interrogation: Why are you going to a conference in East Jerusalem? Why not in Tel Aviv? You are born in Egypt, a neighbour, hmm. What brings you here? Why East Jerusalem? Why not Tel Aviv? I remembered not to lose my temper and to say dispassionately: I don't know. The conference is in East Jerusalem. I am just a participant and did not organize it.

They were questioning my colleague in another room, and I was hoping that she wouldn't lose her temper and say anything inappropriate to the situation we were in. By the time they let us go, the sun had set. It was dark and we were let out onto an empty lot. There was just one car with its lights on. As I wondered what the hell we were going to do and how we were going to get to East Jerusalem, let alone the hotel, a man came out of the lone car. It was the man who had spoken to me earlier that day on the bus from Amman.

On the bus I thought: why is this man speaking to me? Why did he single me out? Surely there are younger and more attractive women on the bus. Maybe I stood out like a newcomer, much like the way I saw my colleague whose questions irritated me to no end.



He came toward us in the empty lot. There were no phones to call a taxi and no taxi stand with eager drivers waiting to pick anyone up. As if it were the most casual question imaginable, he asked, "Are you going to Jerusalem?" "Yes," I said, feeling guilty that I had been so dismissive of him on the bus. "Yes, we're going to East Jerusalem, to the Saint George hotel. I thought I would find a taxi." Later, when I reflected on this encounter, I was grateful that he hadn't laughed at me. Instead he said, "My mother and I will drive you and your friend there." I thought God had sent a helper with his mother to these two idiots standing in the middle of nowhere in a landscape that defies explanation.

Once again let me say that I am from the Middle East and that my colleague is not, and while she asked questions that sent me over the edge, I was more of a foreigner there than she was because I thought I had this covered.

We were the only car on the road and the darkness was punctuated by soldiers and checkpoints, floodlights and tanks. Each time we stopped at a checkpoint, his mother would answer dispassionately, they would both show their ID cards, and we would show our passports.

As we made our way from checkpoint to checkpoint, the mother and son told their story. I thanked them over and over again. How did they know to wait for us? How come they waited all this time? What made them

so sure we would need their help? They said: “Just tell our story, please tell them what you saw.” Since that night I have heard those words from others again and again.

This mother and her adult son waited three hours, in a place where they are easily at risk simply for the act of waiting, holding onto the hope that if people actually knew their story— through the checkpoints, floodlights, soldiers, guns and precariously living in East Jerusalem fearing the loss of their residency cards—that something would be done. This gamble, this act of resistance, this act of hope, is another instance of tragic optimism that Yael’s *Trilogy* documents.

It didn’t matter that it meant waiting three hours, it didn’t matter that I had been dismissive on the bus.

They drove us to the entrance of the hotel. It was nearing midnight and I thanked them again. As we were leaving I asked if there was anything I could do for them. What would we have done had they not been waiting there? They wished us a good stay, and each said in turn, just tell our story, please tell them what you saw.

Sometimes, in the middle of the unrelenting irritation of a hot sandfilled wind, the winds shift, and bring a *benevolent wind with no determinate direction*.

In the days that followed I recorded what I saw in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah. I wish I had time to tell you about all the other moments in that short week’s stay that the harsh winds shifted unexpectedly.

Solidarity work within Israel and Palestine is essential but most activists agreed that political pressures from outside are increasingly necessary. These international pressures could bring about substantial changes in policies and put an end to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land and lives. At the same time solidarity initiatives continued to build hope and strengthened the possibilities for peace. (Even in the Desert)

The last images in *A hot sandfilled wind*: children are playing in the water and we hear water splashing and laughter. *This is the sound of peace, but there is no peace without recognition.* And I reflect on Yael’s *Palestine Trilogy* and its necessity.



TRADING THE FUTURE

video, 2008

Richard Fung

I write this during a period that is the closest in my life to an apocalyptic event. Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) was first recorded in 2019 in China, but by early 2020 much of the world came to a halt. With millions of cases and hundreds of thousands dead, schools and businesses were ordered shut, public transit stalled, people were shuttered in their homes, curfews imposed and borders sealed. Here in Morocco, where I have been caught in the confinement for three months, national and international flights have been grounded and ferries to Europe remain anchored at the wharf. 30,000 Moroccans have been blocked from returning home, some of them day workers in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla who went out in the morning and by evening found themselves stranded on the wrong side of a border.

In b.h. Yael's video essay *Trading the Future*, scholar and filmmaker Lee Quinby explains that the original meaning of apocalypse, and still its common understanding in contemporary Greek, is disclosure or revelation. But in North America, apocalypse has come to signify destruction or devastation, an ending, either gradual or sudden. As the film describes it, apocalypse comes in both religious and secular flavours. For evangelical Christians, the end times unfold with the rapture, in which Christ's followers, living and resurrected, will rise to meet the Lord in the sky. This is followed by Armageddon, the final battle in which God obliterates Satan and non-believers. By contrast, for environmentalists, the world's end is not due to divine intervention but is rather the cumulative effect of harm done by humans to the planet.

Trading the Future takes us along Yael's personal journey as she ponders the ubiquity of this fatalistic plot structure, polling random people on the street, consulting with thinkers and activists, and reflecting deeply on her own formation. Israeli-born but raised in a messianic family in Quebec, Yael parses the Judaeo-Christian underpinnings of the end times scenario that informs the discourse of even some secular scholars and activists—



feminist philosopher and theologian Grace Jantzen explains that the very notion of secular is framed in religious terms, referring to “the time of the absence of God.”

The problem with invoking an inevitable and looming end, the film argues, is that it breeds and justifies despondency and a passive acceptance of social and environmental ills. If the world is going to end anyway, why spend time trying to fix it? To exemplify the stakes, after taking us to Megiddo in Israel, the site that gives us the word Armageddon, Yael visits one of the weekly protests by Women in Black, an organization of Israelis against the conditions of apartheid and occupation in Israel/Palestine. In British Columbia, she speaks with Valerie Langer of Friends of Clayoquot Sound, who identifies the key environmental issues as global warming, biodiversity and toxic pollution, and the principal cause of and impediment to addressing these problems as the profit motive. Critical historian David Noble describes how Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith recast greed, selfishness and self-aggrandizement, previously seen as vices, into virtues. According to the “father of capitalism,” removing regulation of economic activity would result in social good. Instead, by 2020 free market ideology has led to 2,153 billionaires owning more wealth than 4.6 billion people, or 60% of the world's population (World Economic Forum).

Trading the Future illustrates just what we have to lose by failing to act on environmental threats: juxtaposed with shots of daily urban life are images of blue-green anemones in a tidal pool, flocks of seabirds on a misty shore, and old growth forests on Canada's west coast. Langer warns that even in Canada, with its countless lakes and rivers, potable water may become scarce. In the end, Yael surmises that, "apocalypse is neither a religious reality nor the inevitable future. It is political failure."

Trading the Future was released in 2008 but initial funding came from a Canada Council Millennium grant. There was disagreement on when the new millennium would actually start, but as the years 2000 and 2001 approached, apocalyptic prophecies began to circulate with increased frenzy. Nostradamus had predicted back in the 16th century that the world would end in July of 1999, but among contemporary doomsday proponents were self-proclaimed messiah Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church, who looked forward to the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. Judgement day was how conservative televangelist activist Jerry Falwell saw it. During and before 1999 there were widespread rumours of a Y2K computer bug that would crash computers on midnight of January 1, 2000 and cause malfunctions leading to major catastrophes worldwide. Society as we knew it would cease to function.

Of course none of this happened. On January 1, 2000, the sun rose and has continued to rise and set on schedule. But as forests are clear-cut and fossil fuels continue to produce greenhouse gases, species disappear, oceans rise and extreme and unpredictable weather have become the norm. And even after much of the world paused and held its breath during the Covid crisis, the apocalypse didn't arrive. Life continues but along with growing death rates, poverty and precarity for those already vulnerable. This is especially so in countries like the United States and Brazil, run by presidents who are free-market champions and Covid-19 and climate change deniers. While not exactly optimistic, Yael exhorts us not to trade away our future, but to work toward one that is more just and sustainable. Near the end of the film, David Noble considers the question, "What do you think is going to happen in the future?" His answer: "I don't know, what do you want to happen?"



READING BIL'IN IN BERLIN

installation, 2017

Clint Enns

Photo literacy is our ability to read the language of photography. Reading an image requires examining its content and form, in addition to its emotional impact. Beyond the information in the image and our experience of it, there are also extra-textual elements that lie outside of the frame.

Who took the photograph?

Who are the people in the photograph and what is their relationship to the photographer? When/Where/Why was the photograph taken?

b.h. Yael's three-monitor installation *Reading Bil'in in Berlin* (2017) consists of different people interpreting three different photographs (one per monitor). While the participants have access to the images in their entirety, we are only privy to fragments that unfold over time. As the details of the photograph are slowly revealed to us, the participants—seated facing the camera on a couch in front of an exhibition—attempt to describe the image shown to them offscreen. Each of the three videos ends with the photograph revealed in its entirety. The images were taken during protests in Bil'in and feature activists Abdullah Abu Rahmah, Jonathan Pollak and Muhammed Khatib. Although asked to simply describe what is presented in the image, each person provided their own interpretation and analysis of it based on preconceived notions resulting in misreadings—sometimes productive, but often not. While looking at an image, we all read it differently.

Although it is difficult to judge the emotional impact these images had on the participants interpreting them, the simple task of describing what is seen is complicated by personal politics and biases. Even without the participants knowing that these are images of activists facing Israeli soldiers and border police taken in the West Bank village of Bil'in by members of the photojournalist/activist collective *Activestills* in the mid-00's—that is, without any extra-textual information—they see heavily armed soldiers

in conflict with unarmed civilians. But rather than describing what was presented in front of them, their attempts at narrativizing the image made it impossible for them to see what was actually happening.

Images of soldiers and police in military gear who are in conflict with civilians have become all too common, it is only the extra-textual information that is in flux. The power of these images lies in their ability to expose this imbalance of power and in the audience's ability to empathize with those who are being forcefully oppressed. To bear witness is to see the image and to allow it to speak without speaking for it.



LESSONS FOR POLYGAMISTS

video, 2017

Dennis Day

I've worked as an editor for 35 years now, for myself and on countless other film and video projects; the latter easily in the hundreds. I can very comfortably say that I am now in possession of a shiny toolbox of editing techniques, strategies and even "tricks." Not to mention an encyclopedia of thoughts on symbols, signifiers, arcs and representation.

But there remains a magical zone in my profession. Sometimes I get to walk into an edit suite with people who have very little editing experience, and even a few who have never made a single film. It's a sweet place for me, and one that I must live for, or else I would have gone commercial. To cut to the chase, people either have a) practically no technical knowledge of how editing works, b) a modest knowledge from working with iMovie or Final Cut Pro, or c) great editing knowledge and sophistication. But the latter hardly ever hire me, because they don't need to.

On a structural or representational front, the gamut of prior director experience can also be quite wide. And here is my first point. Most people expect me to work within their OWN confines of storytelling, structure and visual representation. And I always fare well here, because I can easily up the ante by pulling out the toolbox. However, when Yael asked me to edit *Lessons for Polygamists*, two circumstances arose that I've experienced only once or twice in 35 years. The first: to represent content (polygamy in this case) without judgment. And secondly: to do things technically that neither she nor I knew how to do.

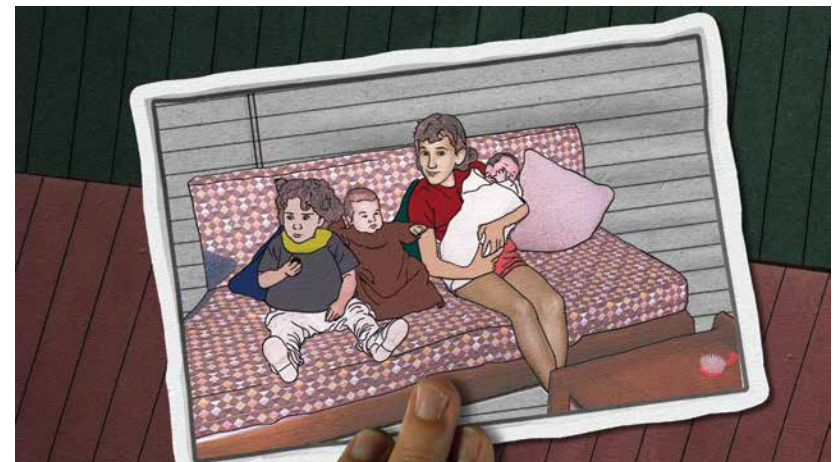
On the first issue, Yael indicated that she did not want to suggest that polygamy was good or bad. A bit strange for me, after 35 years of advocacy and identity politics, as there is typically a systemic or institutional "bad person." And on the second issue, it seemed that Yael was basically "wishing into existence" the visual outcomes of *Lessons*. And by hiring me, she was asking me to come along for the ride.

For our first official work meeting at her house, Yael had arranged a workshop on stop-motion animation from a young man from the Toronto Animated Image Society. I sat and listened somewhat reluctantly. (I typically hate having to learn things, without 48 hours notice.) Not long after, Yael was teaching herself rotoscoping. Patiently plowing through codec and export options until she got it right. Never did I see a hint of frustration. I was looking up new techniques and Youtube how-to videos on an almost daily basis.

On and on like this we went, for over a year, until a beautiful animation flowed out of the render queue. I survived, and felt on numerous occasions that I was riding a bicycle with my hands up in the air.

One of the final thoughts that flowed out of all of this, is that shiny technical toolboxes, and even filmmaking experience, can be a hindrance for both editor and director when venturing into new projects. Creativity often means that we have to "unlearn." This of course, is quite likely an ongoing challenge for every artist. Regularly, it seems, we need to go back to "not being assured" of anything at all.

Many of the best works by filmmakers are their earlier ones, or the formally more risky ones. Painters apparently get better, while filmmakers seem to retire? (Present company excepted of course!)



LESSONS FOR POLYGAMISTS

video, 2017

Kerri Sakamoto

At this moment, I see the world through a veil of mourning. My father has just passed, but it brings me back, as every loss does, to my mother, who passed some years ago. Now my bridge to her is gone. I am unhomed.

But in this story, there are broken and tangled bridges. There is a web of rupture and loss. The storyteller is, like me, unhomed. Not by death, but by secrets. A young girl in a flimsy summer dress amid winter chill bids us, Shush, shush. A path leads into a snowy forest behind her, a path into the unknown, into a fairy tale: a tale of neglect and worse, with no happy ending.

We arrive at a house in a clearing, but we already know it isn't a home of safety and comfort. It begins with one secret that will be multiplied and divided. The girl is to have another mother, says her father. Not instead of her own mother, but in addition. Then another, a third. Half-siblings follow, twelve of them. As the first and eldest, she is the lone one to have experienced the root nesting of mother, father, child.

The home is ruled by the law of a father capricious and cruel. A giant, an ogre, a paunchy caricature with a lit cigarette. At his feet, mothers and children scurry, desperate to curry favour. Every so often, line drawings of this rambling family fill with colour; their outlines tremble with the movement of real, consequential life within. Whimsical animations suggest ephemerality and the peril of erasure. And the girl veers into excruciating focus, an alert mind, body and fair heart, reasoning in vain the why of this ghastly equation. She bears the backbreaking, spirit-breaking burden of her unique position as eldest, as caregiver and as knowing witness. Neglected, beaten, confused, conflicted. A pained child paid too little attention by a mother who herself scrambles for attention. Who waits like the other two women behind one of three doors for a nightly visit from the ruler of the roost. He likes the two white wives, the girl confides, more than her own dark mother.

The girl's struggle for reason and agency is valiant and heartbreaking. I mourn the girl's losses. I mourn the mother who struggles to recall her daughter's name amid the teeming brood and is left with scraps to give. I long for an image of the girl and her mother restored to one another. But that image does not arrive.

Instead, the girl tethers herself tightly to twelve beloved brothers and sisters, and sings for sunshine at the end of unhappy days. *Lessons For Polygamists* is a deceptively clement yet devastating portrait of survival under the giant thumb of a monstrous patriarch.



THE COLOUR OF BUTTER

memoir/book excerpt

b.h. Yael

Note: Yael's stepfather Dave had three wives: Navah (her birth mother), Florence and Loretta. These names are fictional as published: <https://www.thehungerjournal.com/the-colour-of-butter-b-h-Yael> The memoir will include their real names.

Navah knows Dave loves cabbage rolls and she determines to please him. *A way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Isn't that what they say?* She will fix the dish for the whole family, an intensive job of blanching the cabbage leaves to make them pliable, she mixes the rice and ground beef mixture with onions, tomato sauce and spices. She rolls enough for everyone, but she is thinking of Dave and how much he will like and appreciate something he remembers from his childhood.

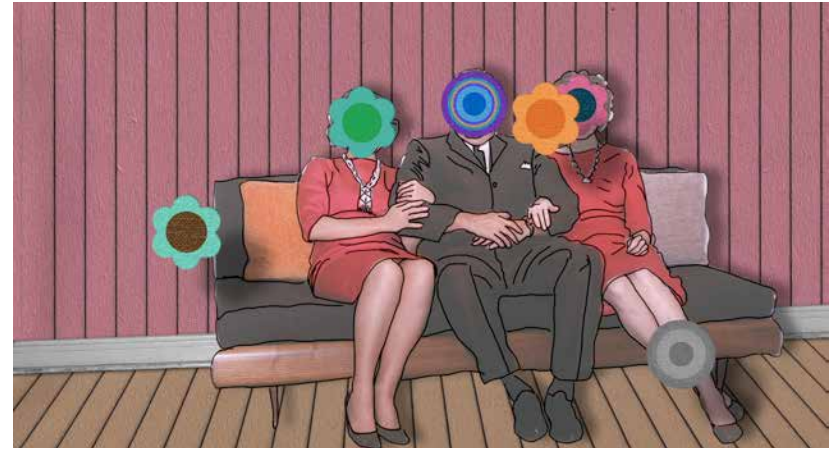
Dave sits at the table, his glasses on his forehead, he watches as the children clamour for their plates and settle in to enjoy the rolls. He smirks, flicking his ashes into the ashtray beside his elbow. Distractedly he picks up a child's fork and cuts a bite out of their portion. Dropping the fork back to their plate, he signals with his hand, *go ahead, eat your food.*

Navah's cooking is always complimented by guests. She loves to cook with the confidence of experience. She is a doer and all her tasks are taken on with gusto. Sewing, repairing a toilet or bicycle, any technical or domestic task is absorbing and accomplished. But the one the family relies on most is her good cooking. Dave, over the years has requested certain foods, instructed her on their preparation, and increasingly competes for the complements she receives.

"Dave would you like a plate now or do you want to eat with us?" Florence notices his sampling.

"Make me a baloney sandwich."

"You know Navah made this just for you." Florence grimaces. Dave grunts and waves her away.



Florence knows not to argue and goes into the kitchen to fry up the baloney in the cast iron skillet. She knows Navah will be upset yet again. She does not say anything.

When Navah asks, "Dave, did you not like the cabbage rolls?" he replies, "Tasteless."

The children have seen Dad's rejections of Navah so many times it is ordinary and yet always uncomfortable. The injustice of the treatment is apparent, but at the same time we are influenced by the many times he has called her emotional or irrational. Navah's escalating distress, her hurt at the rejections, her extreme grief, is always a source of embarrassment. No one wants to be in her place, to be so abject.

The children turn their backs, we all do. We cannot stand this level of cruelty or the constant vulnerable wounds that she displays.

Sometimes she will confront Dave outright.

"What is wrong with the cabbage roll? Do you know I made them specially for you? I made them just as you said your grandmother made. Are you deliberately trying to hurt me?"

That Navah would name Dave's motives or tactics does not help her situation. Dave becomes even more enraged.

"Leave me alone, Woman." And to Florence, "I'll have my sandwich in the living room."

What used to be Dave's roost, the seat at the dining room table, soon became his jail. After his angina diagnosis and then diabetes, he had to be on a strict diet. Florence was in charge of making his food, of keeping track of the calories. He could not stand to sit through our dinners, the temptation too great. When he did lose weight, and his belt buckle was the measure, each hole a triumph, he was exceedingly proud of himself. He lost weight for a time, got a new suit, or Navah adjusted and took in his current one, cleverly leaving the fabric should it have to be taken out again.

"Wow, you look good Dad!" Giving him positive reinforcement or just stroking his ego was part of our job. We did want Dad to stick to his diet. We were concerned for his health. The Mothers most of all, but the children too knew that there were dangers in wait. If he ballooned to an unhealthy size the repercussions could be severe. Dad's physical frame was not that large. He said he was six feet tall, but he was probably an inch or two shorter than that.

Slowly, with one spoon of peanut butter at a time, one piece of cake, one extra piece of chicken, he lost his resolve. Florence still made his special meals, but his cheats and avarice were too great. His weight started to climb again, up to 250 pounds and then nearing 300.

I do not know the number of times he started and failed his diets. This was when I felt sorry for him. He was in the grip of his own demons and addictions and he could not shake them. I did not understand that his weaknesses, as he perceived them, made him depressed, and that he did not have command over his own will.



Cigarettes too proved to be a great battle that he could not win. How many times did he try to quit? The kids lent their help by hiding his red and white packs of Du Maurier. This did not last long. He would laugh, he would be tickled by the concern, but soon enough his craving was too much and soon enough one child or other would cave and bring him his cigarettes and lighter and ashtray.

The living room or dining room, with its haze of smoke, was a place of watchful hazard. Dad regularly fell asleep in front of the screen or even at the dining table and more than once burned a hole in his shirt, on occasion right down to the skin. Occasionally his sheet upstairs also was ruined from his narcoleptic smoking habit.

Dad was properly alarmed, the Mothers watchful, and then slowly, as these things are want to be, he slipped back into his habits of danger and risk. He could have burned the house down with all of us in it. The walls were made of paper and it would have gone down quickly. The Mothers prayed for our safety and knew that were it not for God's watchfulness and protection we well could have been subject to numerous disasters, most likely by fire.

ISOLATION ABC

video, 2020

Deborah Root

Consciousness necessarily exists in layers as it moves through past and present, here and there. Even under lockdown parts of us continue to live in the world.

The anxious filmmaker lies on the sofa, her isolation conveyed by half-closed window blinds and empty corridors. The realization that—despite the slogan—we are not all in this together, allows her to move into a wider reality and, paradoxically, to imagine her experience in relation to others, to people across the globe, people in refugee camps, people in South Sudan and Gaza.

A windowshade opens and light bursts forward like a flash of insight, like a bomb blast, and we enter a palimpsest of both time and space. Images shift from news coming through the computer to photographs of family and children, to bookshelves, Canadian Tire money, festival passes, the window. Soon, to-do lists obscure the visual record of her personal history with the demands of everyday life. Internet news creates a geographical layering between private space and elsewhere, and imagination moves from the personal, to an expanded world, and back again.

As new life emerges in the garden, imagination streams more widely. Will we be able to protect the natural world? Will infection transform us into human bombs, infecting each other with distrust and fear? If isolation drives us deep inside ourselves and refuses collective experience, memory offers us bodies in the street, demonstrating for justice.

Isolation ABC asserts our responsibility to the world we live in, and in so doing creates a counterpoint to stasis and solitude.



BDS, A LETTER TO MY TRIBE

grant proposal excerpt, 2020

b.h. Yael

In Canada, at cultural and academic events, we open with a land acknowledgment. Some are considered and complex, engaging layers of Settler responsibility, sounding out the ongoing dispossessions that First Nations experience as a result of colonial impositions on peoples, communities, lands and non-humans. I often feel the need for similar acknowledgments of another colonial dispossession in the land of my birth. For half a century, Israel has imposed military enclosures on the villages of the West Bank and Gaza, with periodic military interventions, daily food and water deprivation, routine prison and torture and widespread surveillance.

Netflix's response to criticisms of their Israeli media products versus the representations of Palestinians is: "We're in the business of entertainment, not media or politics." Netflix is just one example of the corporate media response to the occupation; the invisibilities of Palestinian suffering and their distorted images are everywhere. We need counter images, a different kind of news made in a different way. My proposed 3-screen installation will evoke a personal narrative of distress and resistance over state actions carried out "in our name," the name of Jews around the world.

Why a letter to my tribe? Because my belonging is multiple: Jewish, Israeli-born to Iraqi and Polish parents, and Canadian. There are other intersectional belongings and the attempts to close down these identities and political agencies are ones I would like to address. Subjective experiences, and especially one's internal conflicts, create a location and perspective necessary for political artworks, making them more complex.

Why BDS? BDS stands for Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions, a non-violent campaign similar to that waged in the 1980s in support of the elimination of apartheid in South Africa. I will examine the last twenty years since the Second Intifada started through both an analytical and subjective lens. What have "they" done? What have "we" done? What happened to the traditional Jewish vow of "never again?" What about the Jewish law "to be just with all who live on the land?"



My address is to those who live here in Canada, where many have access to safety and freedom of expression. But this land is also home to many nations, and many forms of repression. I understand, much as John Greyson states: "As a Canadian, I feel I have every right to use the term 'apartheid'—after all, we Canadians invented it. Our exploitive system of Indian reserves inspired the South African government to institute their bantustans, just as the segregation policies of the American South were mimicked when instituting South Africa's notorious pass laws—and just as Israel currently practices numerous punitive laws which discriminate against Palestinians. Apartheid is a shame that many of our nations share, past and present."



COLLABORATIONS

THE GENESIS STORY

Brian Dedora

In May of 1985 a group of Toronto writers put on a day long 'writers-in-performance' event called *L'Affaire Pataphysique* at a Queen Street West art gallery, Artculture Resource Centre (ARC). The performance event aimed at demonstrating artistically the Pataphysical approach to understanding. Pataphysics, while being famous for its stubborn resistance to definition, can be understood as a branch of philosophy or science examining imaginary phenomena that exist in a world beyond metaphysics, or, the science of imaginary solutions.

In keeping with Pataphysics' usual undertone of spoofing the seriousness of conventional thinking, *L'Affaire Pataphysique* was modelled on a Fair, and the art gallery was transformed into a Fair Grounds, with each of the 14 performers manning a booth at the Fair, with something to sell or give away to the public who wandered from booth to booth being entertained throughout the day by the performers who were each called upon at some point to showcase their Pataphysical wares in a performance, reading, lecture, dance, or, in one case, a demonstration of the art of sautéing fiddlehead ferns.

The "Genesis Story" is a collaborative performance between Susan Frykberg and b.h. Yael, where they re-imagined the Genesis Story where the earth was first populated by women who were impregnated from outer space and gave birth to men. In these two photos at the entrance to the Artist Resource Centre (ARC) you can see b.h. Yael in her costume second from right and in the upper left of the grouping, Susan Frykberg in sunglasses and giving a "Guppy."



Left to right: Brian Dedora, Chris Dewdney, Susan Frykberg, Micheal Dean in lawn costume, Denise Bertrand as Madame Meridian, Bob Bernecky, Nick Power as Solanum Tuberosum, John Riddell as Lledder Hanh Nhoj, b.h. Yael, unknown, unknown. Bottom row: Whitney Smith, Janine Mather, Steve Smith.



Back of Yael's costume.

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

Art collective, 1989-1993

Caroline Seck Langill

I write this the morning after a long night of protests in the wake of George Floyd's death in the US. It has been an extraordinary time in so many ways and I am reminded of how artists' interventions point us to the injustices in our daily lives and those of others. b.h. Yael's work has resonated for me in this way since I met her at OCA in the 1980s and worked with her on the founding of the Spontaneous Combustion collective, active in Toronto between 1989 and 1993. As a collective we were bound by an interest in exhibiting large installations that incorporated technology and spoke to social issues impacting us as artists, women, and queer activists. The atmosphere then was a far cry from the situation we find ourselves in now, isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic, but we were working in an era when AIDS was claiming many in the Toronto arts community and artists who were BIPOC were calling out the art world for its inequities and exclusions.

Many of us who comprised *Spontaneous Combustion* met at Ontario College of Art and realized, upon graduation, that our options for exhibition were limited by a gallery system that eschewed the kind of work we were committed to and played to the market. Undaunted, we found a 10,000 square foot space on King Street West, rented it, tore up the carpet glued to the floor (no mean feat) and installed the work. The methodology that bound us together as artists came through our studies at OCA under Ian Carr-Harris, Liz Magor and Colette Whitten.

Yael's work for the first exhibition evidenced the intense commitment to making that our professors had modeled for us. Riffing off of Meret Oppenheim's *Object* (1936)—a fur covered tea cup, saucer and spoon—Yael's work in the first exhibition, *Home Rule* (1989), included domestic furniture wrapped in Yves Klein blue fun fur. It also incorporated two video screens, one documenting the vicissitudes of domestic life, and the other showed a nine-month old crying at floor height. The installation seductively immersed the audience in a complex residential drama. My interest in citing this work is to emphasize the technologies of display that Yael has continued to employ throughout her career. The quiet subversion



we saw in *Home Rule* was also present in *Bomb Shelters* (1992), exhibited in Toronto and London, wherein a row of chairs was placed in proximity to a corrugated steel outhouse, referencing the global south, and in which a woman could be heard crying softly. It comments on the victims of Western military aggression. The work reminds us that privilege allows oppression to be witnessed at a distance. In her most recent work, *Isolation ABC* (2020), Yael brings us back into the home, to the busyness and business of the pandemic and reminds us that our politics extend both near and far. Spontaneous Combustion created the kind of home we needed as artists in the late 20th century. b.h. Yael was, and remains, a significant contributor to its inception and memory.

¹There were four exhibitions during those years: Massey Ferguson Showroom 1989; Artspace, Peterborough, 1990; 1 Queen St East, 1992; Atlantis Gallery, Brick Lane, London, UK, 1993.

²Between 1989 and 1993 members of Spontaneous Combustion included Barbara Balfour, b.h. Yael, Michael Buchanan, Meryn Cadell, Panya Clark-Espinal, Wendy Coburn, Bill Crane, Laura Kikauka, Caroline Langill, Al Letts, John McLaughlin, Gwen McGregor, Catharine McPherson, Tony Tavares, Sam Weller, Curtis Wehrfritz, Francis Leboutillier and Greg Woodbury.

³Richard Mongiat and David Sylvestre directed and produced the film *Collective City: Spontaneous Combustion* in 2019. It was wonderful to revisit the history and to have it so generously documented.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhBaCq8u8l8>

APPROXIMATIONS: THE MISSION

2000, video (made with Johanna Householder)

Johanna Householder

I was obsessed with Martin Sheen's underpants in the opening scene of *Apocalypse Now*. I thought about how we are inhabited by characters in films, how we internalize and act them out in our daily lives. Yael and I both teach at the OCAD U, and our students invited us to show our work at the opening of xpace Cultural Centre. I talked to Yael about remaking this scene and she said: let's do it.

It was shot in Yael's bedroom because we needed a room with a ceiling fan. It was edited in camera, we would watch each shot then follow it, reenacting the original. We used the original soundtrack and replaced the visuals.

Captain Willard, the Martin Sheen character, is waiting for a mission. Alone and adrift, he sinks into dark places. He gets a Dear John letter from his wife, so he has nothing to return to, or move forward towards. In his drunken hotel he prays for a mission. The MPs arrive. His last words are: "And for my sins they gave me one." The mission that follows is quasi-religious owing both to Joseph Conrad and the Catholic director Francis Ford Coppola. It's the classic hero's journey. Willard is in a long line of heroes, though I felt as inhabited by his role as anyone. It has to do with the mutability of gender in the actor/viewer transaction. It exposes the roots of patriarchy, that was our reason to reinhabit those positions.



APPROXIMATIONS: DECEMBER 31

2000 (made with Johanna Householder)

Johanna Householder

Yael and I were busy teaching full time so it took us all year to do our remake of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which we shot just under the wire, in late December 2000. We had to shoot before 2001 because we didn't want to make 2001 but its alternative, the branching path. The interior architecture of the spaceship remapped itself onto the interior architecture of my house. We were thinking about returning to thwarted futures: weren't we supposed to have jet packs by now? It also points to familiar gender failures, where fridges, stoves and washing machines are still a female domain. The future hasn't delivered new roles for us to inhabit.

The guiding notion of the *Approximations* series was that if you're going to remake something, simply gesturing towards it would be enough. Subsequently there was the #nailedit, where people try to recreate things and miscarry spectacularly. Like drag, the seams in representation, the slippage between original and copy, provide the frisson.

I've had a long relation with drag and the performance of gender through my work with *The Clichettes* (1978-92). There was always an attempt to be a convincing performer, understanding that you're only making an attempt and can never be the thing. I think so much of life is like that, right? We're trying to perform a lot of the time. Those performances are based on something that pre-exists, and that we're trying to replicate. That's why the relationship with our filmic avatars is so intense. At least for me. I wanted to be everything I saw on screen.



APPROXIMATIONS: NEXT TO LAST TANGO

2002 (made with Johanna Householder)

Johanna Householder

I was commissioned by Trinity Square Video for their Trans/Sex/Tech program. Lisa Steele dared me to do *Last Tango in Paris*. Of course it had to be the butter scene. That scene really did a number on Maria Schneider, she never recovered from making that film. That scene wasn't in the original script, it came as a complete surprise, it may actually have been rape. She was 19, while Brando and Bertolucci were much older, and superstars.

With the Clichettes I had lived in different bodies, taken the position of girls, women, men, animals, carpets and Mother Teresa. So many lives had to be touched. Are we always only making love to ourselves? I played both parts in this scene, which raised the question: what is this relationship?

There's a lot of mythology around Brando's background and his own childhood abuse which that scene purportedly calls upon. When he tells her to go get the butter, that rape is also a re-enactment of his own abuse while inflicting trauma on someone else. I hate the word trauma. It's the most overused word in the English language right now. Let's say victimization.

It was excruciating to watch this piece in public. I was 50. Those scenes go to people's core, they address something fundamental. They're about the secrets we can't ever really talk about with each other. We can only act them out.



VERBATIM

2005, video (made with Johanna Householder)

Johanna Householder

Yael had just finished *Trading the Future*, a look at how the end of the world is framed by gender. She had talked to many religious scholars (one—Lee Quinby—volunteered to play the devil in our next video) and she was obsessing on *The Passion of the Christ*. That led to discussions about our making a series of Jesus movies, with possible scene re-enactments from *The Robe* to *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Yael was outraged about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), its spectacle of suffering and appeal to violence, the way it replayed old codes of masculinity and how the snake is a woman is Satan. In the US, a lot of the film's box office came from evangelical groups that were bussed into theatres, kids and adults alike, so she was determined to offer a critique.

I don't think I have Jesus in me and was completely disinterested in seeing *The Passion*, but Yael looks exactly like Jesus and I could be the cinematographer Vittorio Storaro (who also shot both *Apocalypse Now* and *Last Tango in Paris*) It turned out that the scene we chose, where Jesus gets his mission, is exactly the same as the opening scene in *Apocalypse Now*. It's the dark night of the soul: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane waiting for God to send him a message. At the end of *Apocalypse Now*, military police come and take Martin Sheen away. At the end of the Garden scene, the centurians take Jesus away. Both men receive missions they don't want but need to take.

Verbatim. It means word for word. Verbatim testimony. It's also Latin, it recalls the ersatz "time period" of Mel's *The Passion of the Christ*. And of course it's about our use of quotation. Quoting images. Like in the *Approximations* series, we used the soundtrack of the original movie and replaced the picture.



FUELLING THE FIRE OF YOUTH REBELLION

action, 2001

Judy Rebick

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“I don’t get it,” an old friend said after his daughter had announced that she was going to Quebec City to protest the Summit of the Americas next weekend. “Free trade is such a complicated issue. Why is this the issue youth are rallying around?”

The answer is not difficult. For years, our politicians and much of the media have been telling us that there is no alternative to the free trade agenda of cutbacks, no alternatives to:

- privatization,
- deregulation,
- shrinking public services and bloating executive salaries, increasing poverty in the middle of plenty.

Even our governments, we are told, can do nothing to stop the inevitable. Then there was Seattle.

One of my favourite slogans from the 1960s was Mao Tse Tung’s “it only takes a single spark to start a prairie fire.” Seattle was the spark. The prairie is a generation of young people growing up in the midst of corporate culture with little hope for their own future and a world going to hell in a handbasket to satisfy the insatiable greed of the economic elites.

Seattle showed that something could be done. A few thousand people determined to take a stand were able to derail the very powerful World Trade Organization (WTO). Now the fire of youth rebellion rages. It is so widespread that the WTO is planning its next meeting in Qatar. (According to The Globe and Mail, it costs about \$7,000 to fly there from Ottawa.)



In Seattle, North American young people got a taste of their own collective power for the first time since the 1960s. They always provide the fuel for social change because they have the energy, the idealism and the personal freedom needed to change things from below.

Those commentators who are concerned that the media focus is too much on police repression and not enough on the actual issues raised by the trade agreements should relax. Democracy is the issue and police repression is part of the problem. The movement against free trade agreements is a movement for democracy.

Globalization has come to mean the power of corporations over governments and citizens. The massive police presence at these demonstrations is a powerful symbol of the poor state of democracy.

On the April 1st weekend in Ottawa, anti-globalization activists organized a brilliant series of actions that pointed the finger clearly at the problem.

First they held a “People’s Parliamentary Committee Against the FTAA” right in the Parliament Buildings. Lawyer Clayton Ruby explained that police repression was political. They try to intimidate you, Ruby said. That’s what this massive military-like presence is about. When a young woman asked, “I’ve organized a bus to Quebec City from my high school,

but with all the publicity about repression, some of their parents don't want them to go. What should I do?" The audience answered, "Tell their parents to go, too."

Then organizers, including famed American civil rights activist George Lakey, demonstrated non-violent direct action training in full view of the media. What became clear was that the training was about how not to be violent when faced with provocation.

The next day was the "search and rescue" operation to liberate the FTAA documents from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. The building was on Sussex, just down the road from Jean Chretien's house. It was surrounded by police and their barriers. The operation's spokesperson was a bilingual young man with a face like an angel. He wore a Robin Hood outfit. As each group of two hopped over the barricades, they read a statement making it clear that it was their right to see what their government is negotiating on their behalf.

The action was an enormous success. A week later in Buenos Aires, International Trade Minister Pierre Pettigrew announced that Canada had convinced other governments that the document they are discussing should be released. Of course, Pettigrew did not give credit to the protesters. No politician ever does.

There is little power greater than the collective rebellion of youth. The last wave left us women's equality, civil rights, gay and lesbian rights, environmentalism and a transformation of the family. Let's hope this one leads to more fundamental changes.



(OF)FENCES

Video, 2001

John Greyson

Yael and I and a dozen others travelled from Toronto to Quebec City in April, 2001, sixteen months after the Battle of Seattle unleashed a new wave of vibrant anti-globalization activism, and five months before 9/11 repressions put our fledgling movement on ice. The self-proclaimed Three Amigos (Bush, Chretien, Fox) were hosting their wildly extractive Free Trade Agreement of the Americas summit, and for the occasion, had forced Quebec to regress back to its status as a walled fortress, with 4 kilometers of chain link, 4700 tear gas cannisters and 6000 (of)fensive cops keeping 50,000 peaceful protesters from entering the old city. We formed an ad hoc affinity group called Bla Bla Bla (throwing Chretien's dismissive characterization of protesters-as-adventurists back in his face), and our rules were simple: each member would support the others (charging batteries, fleeing cops); each would make a five-minute vid about the FTAA; afterwards, we'd distribute them as a package, our contribution to the movement.

Re-watching Yael's *(of)fences* two decades later, along with the others, I'm struck again by how she perhaps best of all of us captures the urgent sounds and neon colours and feel of that unforgettable cross-generational insurrection. The tape unfolds like a carefully chosen handful of pink and yellow chrysanthemum petals, tossed in slow motion on the surface of a grim puddle. Colours on both sides are primary. Purple-wigged protesters with X's sharpied on their silent lips walk in slow motion toward phalanxes of glowing khaki. Lime-kerchiefed activists gaze up at sinister banana helicopters, perched in cerulean skies. Chain link gleams silver in the sunshine, or orange at night, lit by strobing cop cherries. Word scraps rise and sink in her luminous, liquid frames, sketching maxims: "Fences preclude listening." "Fences deny access." In the fluidity of her petals and puddles, she captures the prescience of a groundswell, the challenge it represented, and the backlash it provoked. "Fences maintain elites."



FACTS

video, 2003

Rebecca Garrett

What do images do to us?

2000-2005: The Second Intifada continued day after day, a spectacle of violence, suffering and the injustice of unequal adversaries. It became impossible to witness the media images without taking some kind of action. The violence of the image lands on your skin. Images leave traces, affect the mechanism and musculature and bones beneath. The shock and shame collect in the internal organs.

What do images ask of us?

2003: The Olive Project: Two Minutes for Justice and Peace attempted to counter the corporate media's spectacle of violence with expressions of solidarity, supporting a campaign by hundreds of international and Israeli volunteers to provide protection for Palestinian olive farmers, to help them harvest their crop, and prevent theft and destruction by settlers. The Hard Pressed Collective (Rebecca Garrett, John Greyson, b.h. Yael, Richard Fung, (later joined by Riad Bahhur and Jayce Salloum) partnered with Charles Street Video and put out an international open call to make two-minute videos in solidarity with the Palestinian olive harvest. Some members of the collective decided to contribute to the chorus of voices by making two-minute videos.

One of the triggers of the Second Intifada was the failure of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in July 2000. b.h. Yael's *pacts* registers the repercussion of this reality viscerally. On a trip to Palestine, Yael purchased a brooch with the hand-carved image of a dove. Peace is a nice idea. Ideas have repercussions. If not cared for, they can become weapons. What does it mean to want peace or live in the failure of peace? When you consolidate your intellect, emotions and experience to make a point, it is sharp, draws blood, leaves marks.

What do images require of us?

In 2003, more than 600,000 olive trees had been uprooted from Palestinian land by Israeli forces since 1967. By 2020, more than 800,000 trees have been uprooted by Israeli forces, in the West Bank alone. The situation is complicated. The situation is simple.

What do images demand of us?



As much as many of us wanted to address the tensions that arose in our workshops that were a microcosm of the fear we found in the broader Jewish community, we were also impatient to get on with the urgent work. Terrible things were happening: Palestinian homes were being bulldozed, Palestinians who resisted the occupation were being killed or imprisoned, new Jewish settlements had displaced Palestinian villages.

The 1980s were a time of resurgent activism on many fronts and in many communities. Many white feminists, like myself, were pushed and challenged by Black, South Asian, Asian, Latinx, Arab and Indigenous women to examine our white-skin privilege and to rethink how the feminist movement was organized, who was at the table, and what issues we addressed. For many members of the JWCEO what followed were new understandings not only of Palestinian history, but also of differences among Jewish people. As our Mizrahi sisters in JWCEO and beyond pointed out, European Jews (Ashkenazi) dominated the official narrative/culture of Israel and oppressed not only the Palestinian people but also Mizrahi/Arab Jewish people. This Eurocentric vision was responsible for the racism against and exploitation of Mizrahi, Arab and African Jewish communities within Israel and reflected the broader Israeli racial and class hierarchies.

The JWCEO stood together in solidarity with Israeli and Palestinian women's peace groups that were central to the peace movement in Israel. A month after the beginning of the First Intifada, Israeli women launched Women In Black in January 1988, and began holding silent vigils on street corners in a number of Israeli cities, dressed in black and holding signs condemning the occupation.

We followed suit in 1989, as we stood together in weekly vigils outside the Israeli consulate on Bloor Street in Toronto. We held signs calling for an end to occupation and for a just peace. At first we decided to engage people as they passed by and had some fruitful discussions. We were also the target of fury from some Jews who felt we were "traitors to our own people." These responses were mild in comparison to the intense verbal and sometimes physical abuse that Women In Black faced in Israel.

The Gulf War of 1990-91 expanded the group rapidly because Jewish women were looking for a place to oppose the war as Jews in community. We organized Jewish anti-war demonstrations and spoke publicly wherever we could at anti-war mobilizations.



On International Women's Day 1991, the JWCEO carried our banner as we stood together in the Palestinian women's contingent. Self-determination for Indigenous, Palestinian and Black South African peoples was the theme for the march. The relationship between Palestinian women's activism and the JWCEO was crystallized in this historic moment of collaboration in Toronto's feminist movement and many of these political and personal intimacies continue to this day.

We stood together and we stood apart from other Toronto Jews, on Jewish New Year 1991 and 1992, when we ventured up north on Bathurst Street to where a significant portion of the Jewish community lived. With unease and anxiety we unfurled a banner "5752, a year for peace," handed out leaflets and talked to whoever would listen. These were exercises in patience and persistence.

Later our vigils were silent, as we stood together, dressed in black, holding our signs, bearing witness to violence, making the occupation present and not looking away.

Expressing ideas that challenge loyalty to Israel is never easy. But together JWCEO found strength and joy in our newly-developed dissenting voices. We laughed and we cried. We developed fresh connections and new rituals. I felt that I could speak from a place of wholeness, a place where I didn't need to divide my social justice affinities.

Was it even possible to have a vibrant, engaged organization with a powerful critique of Israel without taking a position on Zionism? JWCEO understood that of course there were differences among us, particularly around Zionism. Some envisioned two states where Palestinians and Jews lived in peace and dignity. Others rejected the entire Zionist project and dreamed of justice through a bi-national secular state. In the years following the 1993 Oslo Accord, some of us, including myself, gave up any hope for a two-state solution. JWCEO sat with these differences, while trying to strengthen the voices of Jews who actively condemned the occupation.

Looking back thirty odd years, I am proud that JWCEO created space for public actions and critical conversations about Israel and Palestine. Alongside other organizations, we made room for public expressions of solidarity with Palestine and enlarged the number of people who were in the Palestine “solidarity room” with us. Until this day, people continue to stand together at weekly vigils every Friday afternoon. We laid some groundwork for another constellation of groups, and for the anti-apartheid and boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns that followed. JWCEO joined a long tradition of outlier Jews who say no to a consensus based on a dangerous Eurocentric and racist nationalism.

We stood together and we stood apart. With persistence and love, we stood.



ACTION

2014, Embassy Occupation

Judy Rebick

In January 2009, eight women met at the Friends House and decided we would pretend to be tourists to enter the Israeli embassy. Everyone made up their own story about why they were going to Israel. The consulate had a lot of security and it's not easy to gain access. We would try to get all eight people in, but even two people could do it. I went first with one young enough to be my daughter. Security asked "my daughter" a question and when she didn't have the answer I said "Oh, she's so difficult to deal with." I had suddenly become my aunt Ceil. I started telling her off, and she started arguing with me until the guy said "OK, OK," and let us through.

The group asked me to deal with the media, but I said I didn't think anyone else had as much experience dealing with the cops, so I would do that. One asked, "What's the worst thing that can happen? We'll get arrested." And I said "No, that's the best thing that can happen." Because then it will be bigger news.

Once we got inside we sat in a circle and announced, "We're not leaving. We're protesting the attack on Gaza." We were in touch with people outside and as soon as we got in they sent out press releases. Then this incredible thing happened. There are a number of windowed booths where you get your visa, and all of a sudden metal shutters appeared klak klak klak, like a wall coming down. Then two security people arrived. One said, "You're on Israeli territory here so Canadian laws won't protect you." He was trying to scare us. So I said—which wasn't actually true—"This isn't an embassy, it's a consulate. Canadian laws still apply."

"We own it and we want you out."

"We're not leaving until the police come."

"They've already been called."

The young woman who pretended to be my daughter said, "We're not leaving here until Israel leaves Gaza!" He grabs one leg—and if you grab

one leg you're going to hurt someone—if you grab two you're not going to hurt them. He was trying to hurt her. I shouted, "Take your hands off her!" Yael had a phone and was busy filming. He shouted, "No phones!" She never stopped. He walks over to Yael, grabs her phone and slaps her in the face. I say, "You touch one of us again and you're in big trouble... Do you know who we are?" Yael was very cool. The other guy steps forward and says, "I'm an RCMP officer." There was an undercover RCMP officer working at the Israeli consulate. This is how our government spends money. I said "You get him out of here." So he did.

The cops were friendly and almost supportive. But they were required to handcuff us with our hands behind our backs. We remained like that for over an hour before they took us into wagons. I think they were discussing, maybe with Israel, whether to press charges. Inside the police wagons some began really freaking out and crying. I was helping people, and I think Yael was too. Then we came out and there was a little rally, we were released without charge and spoke to the media. The next day we were the lead on Al-Jazeera. A friend of mine said that action of Jewish women did more to combat anti-semitism in the Middle East than anything he'd ever seen. I'm glad we did it but I paid a big price. I had PTSD for two years afterwards. That's when Yael and I became friends.





INTERVIEW

FAMILY STATES

an interview with b.h. Yael

Mike: You're an artist and activist in equal measures. They seem inseparable in your practice. But I wonder if you came to them in different ways?

Yael: Most definitely. I am an artist first, though like many I began by feeling I was an imposter. Eventually one grows into the identity. I cannot fully call myself an activist, maybe I'm earlier in the process, or maybe I hold it in high esteem and my standard for that requires more commitment, time and possibly sacrifice. But I do come to active engagement through art.

Thinking about making art started at York University where I studied English. My three roommates, a visual artist, a musician and a dancer, opened new worlds for me. I took one art course but continued onto teacher's college. Only after I had my son, Misha, was I inspired to pursue art making. This marked the beginnings of a political consciousness, in some way an institutional critique, as I gave birth at home and invited friends and my mother. I was living in a housing co-op in the east end at the time, and the community I was in was oriented around social justice. Going through the birth allowed me to understand my own strength but also that you don't have to accept the system that's given. I began making art by taking courses at Art's Sake, painting with Joyce Wieland, drawing with Diane Pugen.

When I applied for admission to the Ontario College of Art (then OCA, now OCAD University) I walked out of the interview and asked for another right away. The woman at the desk told me I had to be rejected first. The four men on the panel had showed utter disinterest. I remember one piece was about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. In the second interview the two men who interviewed me assured me that the work was more advanced and encouraged me to meet assignments at whatever level of sophistication. It was a huge moment because it taught me it was possible to successfully challenge authority. I've been tied to that institution ever since as I've been teaching there for thirty years now.

Prior to art school I had gone to a couple of events where local women artists showed videos. Phyllis Waugh videotaped herself wearing a wedding

dress while climbing a ladder and it stuck with me. One of the meetings was organized by the Women's Cultural Building. I knew I wanted to work with video, a newer technology in art making.

In Toronto at that time artists were analyzing media, genres were unpacked, soap operas reworked. I was grateful that gender and feminist issues were explored because that gave me a language for analyzing my family upbringing. At OCAD in the mid-80s only 13% of the teachers were women, but they were better represented in my faculty. Lisa Steele, Carol Laing, Nora Hutchinson and Liz Magor were influential in developing my work, but also Morris Wolfe, who interestingly suggested I should work in essay form, which I grew into later. Colin Campbell taught script writing, and Norman White and Doug Back taught electronics.

Mike: A lot of early video in Toronto featured talking head performances directed to camera, often using artist personas or drag acting. General Idea, Lisa Steele and Colin Campbell were keynotes. Your early work also seems oriented towards camera performance.

Yael: With my first videos *Why She Got Pregnant* (1985), *You belong to me* (1986), *Jain Walks the Line* (1986), *My Mother is a Dangerous Woman* (1987) and *Is Dad Dead Yet?* (1990) I felt too shy to perform in front of the camera, so I wrote scripts for actors. The first ones were transitional, from painting to video, very static, gestural, with little movement and emerged from questions of relationships, why anyone does anything,



the many conflicting reasons, ambivalences and motivations. The latter two involved more complexity and had fictionalized layers. For example *My Mother* drew on myths such as Demeter and Persephone, while the oblique narrative represented three generations, and addressed the larger context of women's complicity which is what makes the mother dangerous. I only started using myself as both a subjective reference and a performer with *Fresh Blood*, in a documentary essayist mix. The performativity is grounded in the issues of personal history and memory.

Mike: *Is Dad Dead Yet?* (1991) is a beautifully realized drama, with sterling actors playing an aunt and niece chitchatting about relationships. It's also an essay in disguise about patriarchy. The convos around early pregnancy, and erotic attachments to people who trigger childhood catastrophe feel personal, lived, embodied, though the film works hard to place these singular experiences into a larger cultural frame.

Yael: Ironically, I was trying to be anti-dramatic. I was critical about the wave of "new narratives" at a time when artists felt the need to inhabit dramatic forms. The title came from my sister who scribbled it on top of a postcard while travelling through Europe. I knew right away that was my title.

I was grappling with my family history but couldn't deal directly with the wounding and secrecy in the family, with the Dad that abuses power, and who represents the extended power of patriarchy. I'm still grappling with these issues, having finished a family memoir. I was thinking about the relationship between authoritarian states and family structures, the need to uncouple family and nation, and paradoxically how those institutions further each other. The piece is also a meditation about images, the niece and aunt talk about the hold they have on us, how they resonate and spread, creating a larger culture.

Mike: Both niece and aunt restage pictures of women from popular culture, offering possible subject positions that women have occupied. Curiously or not you do this using songs, including a bunch from Kurt Weill.

Yael: In the first scene, the niece re-inhabits and performs filmic images of women from popular films. This creates a frame to receive the personal stories that she shares with her aunt. Eventually the aunt reveals how she might have accidentally killed her husband, which, by extension is the desire to kill patriarchy. I was trying to understand how the psyche works and how decisions that are multiply inflected are made.



Mike: Do you think making pictures can create political change?

Yael: It just did. A teenager brought out her camera and recorded George Floyd's murder by police, and now there are protests all over the world. It wasn't deliberate in the same way as making art can be, but yes, it can and it does and it has. I think artmaking is about interrogating the image and believing in it, all at once. We don't know if or when our pictures might have an effect. Each gesture is a drop that accumulates, that's why the collective is so important. One person is not going to make change, but when a number of people come together that's when it happens. Actions and images accumulate and then at a certain point people are ready, something turns. For instance, though Israel acts with hubris and impunity, the occupation can't last forever. The state doesn't want people to see what it's actually doing, but images and documentations by artists, activists and civilians keep accumulating.

Mike: You helped to form the Olive Project collective, can you talk about how that started?

Yael: During the Oslo Peace Accords in the 1990s I remember lying in bed watching a small TV as Israeli PM Rabin flew over Jordan, the first time he'd been allowed to do so. I cried with the promise of a new peace, but those hopes were dashed. In 2000 the Camp David Summit between

Israel/Palestine ended without agreement and then in September Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount, a deliberate provocation that spurred the Second Intifida, a five-year Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation.

I had considered one small aspect of this conflict in *Fresh Blood*, among many other issues of identity, but hadn't focused on Palestine. A number of Canadians, Jews, Arabs and Palestinians came together to form the Coalition for a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine. And later I also worked with Not in Our Name. In December 2001, there was a call and mobilization of international activists to go to Palestine. Activists and solidarity groups arrived from Europe and North America, though not so many from Canada. Kathy Wazana and I went to Palestine for a week of daily actions planned in different locations around Israel and the West Bank.

In Hebron I saw how Jewish settlers were living literally on top of Palestinians' heads, above their stores, throwing down trash and rocks. I saw the aggression and horror of how they were incrementally taking over the surrounding lands through settlements. It was obviously wrong. That was my politicizing moment.

I don't think I would have done as much if I hadn't been with Kathy. She was incredibly resourceful about what was going on. She was formidable. We had been in an action in Bethlehem where she found out that there would be a large gathering at the Mukataa in Ramallah with Arafat who was at his headquarters under siege. We jumped on the bus with the Italian delegation.

In the Middle of the Street (2002) was a documentation of that trip, showing activist demonstrations in both Israel and Palestine, along with the police/army response. It begins with a street protest by disabled Israelis, to show that the occupation also has adverse effects for Israelis. Government resources go to the military and to a war economy, rather than for social services.

Mike: In the images you show police interactions, the racial hierarchies seem so clear. The (mostly) white foreigners are addressed with language, while the Palestinians are routinely manhandled, thrown to the ground, even children are harassed because Palestinians are less than human.

Yael: Israeli culture is very aggressive. Military service is mandatory, it's a deep part of the culture. And it's true that Palestinians are dehumanized in order to facilitate the occupation and increasing land grabs. The idea at the time was that a witnessing presence would cause the Israeli military



and police to be less belligerent, caustic, punitive. For example the International Women's Peace Service established a village house in the Salfit region hoping to deter aggression simply through their presence. There were a number of different groups who organized that way. Of course the Israelis learned from that and banned International activists from entering the country. Some were jailed. Or interrogated at length in order to traumatize them on their way out.

When I returned I participated in some educational report backs organized by the Coalition. John Greyson, Richard Fung, Rebecca Garrett and I formed the Hard Pressed Collective, partly, we joked, as an excuse to enjoy great meals together. There wasn't as much video work about Palestine at the time. We put together a curatorial project, *The Olive Project*, in order to get more people making work about resistance to Israel's colonial project. We would use the internet as an exhibition platform, a new idea in 2003. We put out a call for two-minute videos that related to olives, two minutes (peace sign) for peace and justice in Israel/Palestine. As we worked on the project we decided to make our own work as well.

I had bought wooden pins made out of olive wood in Jerusalem. The carving showed a dove with an olive branch in its beak, a traditional image of peace. I was feeling frustrated about the failure of the many peace

accords, the negotiations made in bad faith, of course mostly by Israel and the United States. The idea for *pacts* was that I would create a grid of doves on my back, each pin representing a failed accord, a wounding. John and Rebecca helped me shoot and John found a make-up artist to fake the punctures, but it didn't work and finally I said: just stick them in. I wanted to show how these negotiations have consequences that are lived in the body. The image seems garish and effective. And I laugh as I hadn't thought it through and had to get a tetanus shot after the filming.

Mike: The Israeli state was born, like many others, in an act of convulsive violence, this time meted out by what British occupiers had labelled terrorist groups. Though in the new state, these terrorists were now national heroes. Just before statehood, in a Palestinian village named Deir Yassin, located unfortunately close to Jerusalem, Jewish militia killed opposing fighters, and then the massacre began. As you recount in the movie, the men and boys who were left were put on parade as victory spoils and then executed. It was part of a terror campaign that never stopped, aiming to drive Palestinians out of Palestine.

Yael: *Deir Yassin Remembered* (2006) started as a commission for the American group Deir Yassin Remembered. I negotiated so that I could make my own doc and that they could use it for their own purposes. In the early 2000s, the Israeli New Historians were coming up with fresh evidence of previous massacres, which met with a lot of resistance. But Deir Yassin was one of the few massacres the state acknowledged, notice had even appeared in the New York Times the day after the invasion of the village. I spoke to a survivor, and to the school principal who oversees the still existing school that housed children orphaned after the massacre.

Deir Yassin was one of the largest massacres, though there were others. It was widely publicized in order to frighten Palestinian villagers out of their homes. Many left thinking they were going away for a few days but they were never allowed to return. One of the key planks of peace negotiations, and certainly of the BDS movement, has been "the right to return," the right of the dispossessed to reclaim houses that were stolen by Israelis, that is within their rights under international law.

I have a personal connection to the events of the Nakbah. My father came to Palestine as an orphan. He was an angry, underaged youth and he joined the extremist Zionist paramilitary group, the Lehi, known as the Stern Gang. He was part of that war.

The last time I saw my father was in 2008. We were on the roof of my cousins' apartment in Beersheva when they pointed to the land and said, "Your father was part of what helped us regain this land." So there is an acknowledgment within the family, though I don't know much about his activities. Historian Jeff Halper uses the phrase "redeeming the land," I think that's how my father understood what he was doing. Although it's unstated, the film addresses the sins of the fathers, both my father and the settler state.



Mike: You were born in Israel, it's where your father and mother met. How did they come to Israel?

Yael: During the Second World War, when the Germans invaded Poland, many Jews fled to Russia. My grandfather was killed by Nazis who invaded his town, and following his murder my grandmother crossed the Polish/Russian border with my father, her youngest child. Russia wanted to populate the western front against the Nazis, so the Jews who came across were asked to pledge allegiance to the state. Those who refused were sent to Siberia. That's where my grandmother and father went. Those on the front faced the subsequent German invasion and many were killed. After they were released from the Siberian work camp where they ended up, my grandmother, who I obviously never met, made it as far west as Samarkand. She put my father in an orphanage and died. He was taken to

another orphanage in Tehran, part of a wave of Polish child migrations, most of them malnourished and diseased. The Jewish children were shipped by boat to Palestine, while he was taken in a second convoy of large trucks overland.

My mother's family came from Iraq as part of a planned exodus. Her childhood in Baghdad was a happy one. Israel has never acknowledged how they collaborated with the Iraqi state to bring Jews to Israel. It was a handshake. Iraq was eager to get rid of their Jews and to take their properties, and Israel needed Jewish bodies to displace Palestinians. Jews from many Arab countries were lured or scared into migrations and when they arrived they experienced racism and second-class status.

My mother was 17 when she met my father. The state thought there would be a new Israelite created out of these combinations of Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi Jews. But my father was a damaged and traumatized man, and my mother probably immature. The marriage didn't last long. When I was seven my mother remarried. She and my stepfather, who I called Dad, told my father I would accompany them on their honeymoon through Europe. That's why I use the word "stolen" in *Fresh Blood*, because his absence in my life occurred without his consent. I didn't see him from the age of seven until I was thirty, when I went back.



Video allowed me, and especially in *Fresh Blood*, to pull the threads of these moments in my life, to connect them to larger discourses and analyses of power through an intersectional lens: Arab Jewishness and the racialization of the Jewish body, Palestine, Christian rites and their implications in my life, gender and sexuality, and a longing to connect to my grandparents and to understand my belonging.

The beginning of that journey and analysis certainly started with that first trip back. My partner, Wendell, and I went with my aunt. On the bus she told us that my father would ask if Wendell is Jewish and that we had to lie. We had to say yes. I had fought against lies and subjugation with my stepfather my whole life, and I felt I couldn't again with my father. When we got to the door, he opened it and asked, "Is he Jewish? Is he Jewish?" Before even saying hello. It was so aggressive, emotional, wrought. Wendell and I looked at each other and said, "Yes, yes, he's Jewish." "Well, what's his name?" "Block." My father was appeased for a moment. He asked, "Why didn't you come sooner?" I told him I did not have the means, and I asked, "Why did you not come to see me?" He replied, "It's for the child to come to the parent." Something about that astounded me. Or maybe it reinforced what I'd known all along, his damage, because parents are supposed to take care of children, but also it reinforced the primacy of the patriarch, even when broken. I communicated with him later on that trip and he asked again, "Is he Jewish?" And I said, "No." He asked why and I said, "That's just the way it is."

Mike: You made four movies with performance artist Johanna Householder, a friend and colleague at the art school. Can you talk about how those works started, and why you persisted?

Yael: It was the most fun project. We made four films. Very DIY. Together we took up four scenes that were both influential and formative, not just personally but culturally. Johanna in her performance work and as part of the Clichettes had done a lot of lip sync, she was used to inhabiting someone else's words. In *Approximations* we wanted to inhabit filmic images, and explore how images inhabited us. The first work, *The Mission*, started in an off-the-cuff way. Johanna had been thinking about the opening scene of *Apocalypse Now* with Martin Sheen in his hotel room, while I had been thinking about apocalypse. We restaged it shot for shot, edited in camera, all in my bedroom and we used the original sound.



The next piece was *December 31, 2000* (2002), restaging a scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Dave is an astronaut dealing with a renegade super computer. He has to dismantle the machine while trying to distract it. It's an apocalyptic text that pits humans and technology as adversaries. As Hal the computer breaks down a memory is triggered and it begins to sing the first song ever 'voiced' by a computer, *Daisy, Daisy*. The scene provokes the common equation made between human memory and machine memory, a pervasive projection, problematic and mechanistic. A rather dangerous persuasion.

It was absurd and gratifying to turn Johanna's house into a spaceship. The aesthetic of the domestic was imposed onto this grand feature film. And inhabiting the male body as a female produced an instant counter-narrative, showing how masculinity is created through performance and roleplay.

When I came out of art school I felt I had to do my own uniquely original work, which is such bullshit. We learn language by copying it, then making it our own. Images should be considered part of our available lexicon, just like any other material. Working with Johanna, I had to rethink my ideas about originality and appropriation.

Mike: You got to play the role of Jesus in the fourth film you made together, that must have felt satisfying.

Yael: Yes, it was fun playing Jesus but difficult to lip sync Aramaic. *Verbatim* (2005) is based on Mel Gibson's version of the New Testament, *The Passion of the Christ*. It's a revenge narrative, filled with the pleasures of violence. I first saw it in the US with Lee Quinby and was very aware of the audience. While I found it offensive, the level of enjoyment was evident, and I was shocked that many had brought their children. It was post-9/11 so the film reinforced an American exceptionalism in the context of a war against Muslims and the Arab world.

The scene shows Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before his crucifixion. He asks God to let this cup pass from him, but also accepts his fate, his role. In the garden he is tempted, the snake appears recalling the original sin, and the devil also appears but as a woman. Of course! Gibson's interpretation was so egregious it needed to be lampooned. As with the other *Approximations* works we replayed the scene shot by shot, and used the existing soundtrack, but the gender swapping turned it into something very different.

Mike: *Trading the Future* (2008) looks at climate change through the lens of religious apocalypse, Christian power structures are lined up with a capitalist logic of ruling class imperialism and extraction. You unpack mythologies, even as you're busy shooting streeters in New York, interviews with academics and bible experts, nature world reflections, home movies and more. It's a lyrical travelogue of an essay. Can you talk about how you gathered this material?

Yael: After the hype of the millennialist turn of 2000, and Y2K, the virus that was going to kill the internet, and after all the apocalyptic hand-wringing, I wanted to find out why these narratives have stuck around, and how religious stories have become deeply embedded in secular culture. We've known about impending environmental disaster and climate change for so long, why haven't we done more? My question was whether or why, at least from a western point of view, we have accepted that apocalypse is inevitable and that the world will end.

When I was a child I learned that Jesus would return and we would meet him in the air. Depending on what interpretation Christians believed, his return would introduce a new millennium that would usher in 1000 years of peace or 1000 years of strife. *Trading the Future* starts with a memory of looking

for Mom and Dad. When I couldn't find them in the house, I was sure they had been raptured, that Jesus had come back and I had been left behind. The bible lesson had been internalized, and I was unworthy of salvation.

I began shooting on a journey of discovery. When Dennis Day and I started editing I had approximately one hundred hours of footage. *Fresh Blood* had been a complex video essay, it was difficult to structure so many strands and I had thought I would never use that form again, but here I was. It took a long time to weave together narratives of apocalypse, environmental urgencies, our ideas about death, natality, and Israel/Palestine where the biblical prophecy of Armageddon was supposed to be realized.

Mike: In his 1977-78 lectures *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault argues that a new art of governing people began with the Christian church. It used techniques of isolation (monastery, confession...) to create an "interior" self, based on imaginary relations (God) that were more important than human relationships, and founded in obedience. Ingeniously, the new individual is created out of choices we make ourselves! The theme of separation runs across your movie, though there are counter-narratives that show you and your friends. How does a culture based on extraction and separation turn to embrace ecology?

Yael: I grappled with ideas of internalized authority and notions of obedience in *My Mother is a Dangerous Woman*, and was partially influenced by the writing of Alice Miller, a psychoanalyst who wrote *For Your Own Good*, and also *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. I now realize there is a connection between these two works. Scholars such as Grace Janzen, Lee Quinby and David Noble in *Trading the Future*, apply a Foucauldian analysis and link these issues to the destructiveness of the Christian texts and their interpretations, the idea that we are to defer our lives to the future, when we retire, or to heaven, and even further to end times narratives. Though science may be considered an alternative to religion, science is also ideologically implicated. We have to look at scientific solutions for climate change and analyze them as to whether we are reproducing the same perspectives, but through another practice, or lens, or another form of colonization. That's definitely a lot of what was the underbed or compost of that video.

In making the work I wanted to stay away from the catastrophic pictures that too often accompany and reinforce apocalyptic stories and visions of the end of the world. How to undermine these? What do we have instead?



We have our embodied presence in the places we live, the ground we walk on, our dailiness. That's why I show images of mopping the floor and cleaning the bathtub, quotidian, everyday practices, because we don't appreciate being here. I wanted that shot of having dinner with my friends, because community is a response to apocalypse.

I grew up in a large family that was very isolated. Something about that experience feeds into the embrace and rejection of the idea of the self-sufficient individual. I still struggle with that. One wants to be autonomous, contained, effective, productive, but you can't be without community. And you can't be without the earth, and you can't be without the resources that the earth brings us, and I don't mean in an extractive way, but in a sustaining way. One of the clips that did not make it into the video was Vandana Shiva speaking about a cyclical notion of history and life experience coming from India where she lives. There are disasters, floodings, and droughts, but the earth regenerates. Climate change, extractive practices and poisoning the earth threatens this world view. To make the present and the future, to make them healthy places to be, ideas, policies and decisions have to further and affirm life. There are many counter narratives to apocalypse.



ON THE STREETS

LEFT
TURN
SIGNAL



Queen St W

416.593

Canada Trust

Canada Trust

QUEEN ST W

Make
Love
not War

TREMBLANT

Previous page: Queen Street, Toronto, June 2010
G20 protests of inequities of global financial systems



Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, August 1990
March for Peace and Justice in support of Kanehsatà:ke and Oka barricades



Bloor Street, outside Israeli consulate, Toronto, June 2010
Gaza Freedom Flotilla raided by Israeli forces, nine international activists killed



Bloor Street, Toronto, July 2016
Pride memorial action, post Pulse nightclub shooting



Avenue Road, Toronto, June 2009
Put Human Rights on the Menu
Action in response to Koffler cancellation of Katz exhibition



Outside Nazareth, Israel Palestine, May 2008
 Illegal Nakbah day commemoration



Berri Street, Montreal, August 2014
 Israeli bombardment of Gaza



Dundas Square, Toronto, February 2011
 Egyptian Revolution, Mubarak resignation



Bloor & Yonge, new location of Israeli Consulate, Toronto, July 2020
 No to Annexation of more Palestinian lands



Avenue of the Americas, NYC, June 2018
Refusing Trump's immigration policies and family separations



City Hall, Toronto, November 2013
Stop Line 9 and Tar Sands Oil



City Hall, Toronto, June 2020
BLM and Pride during Covid



WORKS AND PLEASURES

- 1985 Genesis Story, collaborative performance with Susan Frykberg
- 1985 Why She Got Pregnant, video, 5'
- 1986 You Belong To Me, video, 6'
- 1986 Jain Walks The Line, video, 5'
- 1987 My Mother Is A Dangerous Woman, video, 16'
- 1987 Watch Your Language, wood cabinet, photo+text transparency, plaster, video monitor
- 1989 Home Rule, wood cabinet, fun fur, object, video and audio (exhibited with Spontaneous Combustion Collective)
- 1991 Is Dad Dead Yet?, video, 35'
- 1993 Bomb Shelters, corrugated metal, wood, wooden chair, audio recording (exhibited with Spontaneous Combustion Collective)
- 1996 Fresh Blood, A Consideration of Belonging, video, 55'
- 1999 I Will Be (Whatever), photograph transparency, lights, electronics
- 2000 Help Me, video installation
- 2000 you are here, video installation (part of: Orifice, site-specific installations at Images Festival)
- 2000 Seldom video, 4:30'
- 2001 (of) fences, video, 5:30' (part 5 of blahblahblah (Re)viewing Quebec 55 minutes, 2001)
- 2002 The Lonely Lesbian, video, 4:45'
- 2002 In the Middle of the Street, video, 33'

- 2002 Approximations (Parts 1-3) (made with Johanna Householder), video, 18:41'
- 2000 The Mission, 4:21'
- 2000 2001, December 31, 7:20'
- 2001 Next to Last Tango, 7'

- 2003 Triskaidekaphobia, video, 5:57'

- 2003 The Olive Project—Hard Pressed Collective (Richard Fung, Rebecca Garrett, John Greyson, b.h. Yael) Web-based video program (including Pacts) and live video conference. 2 minute-videos commissioned around Palestinian solidarity

- 2003 the fear series: (offering) buttons and container

- 2005 the fear series (journey, clarity and inheritance), 3 video projectors, buttons

- 2005 Verbatim (made with Johanna Householder), video, 7:45'

- 2006 Palestine Trilogy: documentations in history, land & hope, video, 75'
- Deir Yassin Remembered, video, 28'
- Even in the Desert, video, 33'
- A hot sandfilled wind, video, 13'

- 2008 Trading the Future, video, 59'

- 2010 Ken Tov Beseder, video, 4:36'

- 2017 Lessons for Polygamists, video, 14:30'

- 2017 No Lies, video, 1'

- 2017 Reading Bil'in in Berlin, 3-monitor video installation

- 2020 Isolation ABC, video, 4:50'





