

Ori Gersht: fractured beauty and photography's failing sight

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In his recent essay on Gerhard Richter's painting, *September*, the artist's response to the attack on the World Trade Centre of 11th September 2001, the curator Robert Storr begins with a moving account of his own, personal experience of that day as a resident of New York. Living in Brooklyn across the East River, slightly removed from but within clear sight of the twin towers, Storr recalls how, as the traumatic events unfolded, the air in his neighborhood became filled not only with choking ash but with the scraps of paper and airborne litter he had already seen swirling 'like white seagulls' around the buildings as they burned. Later, pausing in the garden behind his house, he found the ground covered with these paper fragments, 'mainly from business manuals and spreadsheets', while another local resident, by chance not at her desk that morning in the World Trade Centre and desperately trying to reach her colleagues by phone, had found papers from her office that had blown over the river and landed on the front steps of her house. Such poignant details, so many of which now cast fine threads of understanding over the iconic visual images 9/11, also remind us of the fragile nature of our material reality. Because the entire world bore witness to the spectacle, the shocking implosion of the twin towers has given us a new and concentrated vision of the atomization of reality that has, in many ways, eclipsed those photographs of the first atomic explosions and those of the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that helped so much to define and fuel the deep-seated anxiety of the nuclear age. The sight of one of the world's largest man-made structures, along with thousands of its human occupants, turned to dust before our eyes has perhaps crystallized an era, or a contemporary condition, and given us an abiding image of profound instability. But as the smoke and dust billowed around the Manhattan skyline, and as the sinister wind-blown confetti of war settled in Brooklyn, 9/11 also generated its multiple images of unnerving beauty. The camera crews and onlookers who recorded the scenes, as well as the countless millions who watched on TV, were mesmerized by a sense of the miraculous in the horror; fear and dread came with a sense of awe at the

magnitude of what had happened and uneasy excitement at the sight of history being made.

Ori Gersht's art rests on just such a profound duality, in which what is formally beautiful, fragile and fugitive is inextricably bound up with violence, fragmentation and a sense of trauma and loss. And for Gersht these ideas trail back into history. So, while his work resonates with the conditions of contemporary conflict and threat, as an Israeli artist now based in London, it is also imbued with the experience and deep memory of the Holocaust. But perhaps even more widely Gersht's photographs and films remind us, as Barthes suggested, that 'the age of the Photograph is also the age of revolutions, contestations, assassinations, explosions...' From the very point of its invention, photography has drawn us into a phenomenological conflict between 'duration' – which Barthes likened to the process of 'ripening' (and to which we might add, slow decay) – and a kind of 'impatience' with time, manifest in a fascination with the moment. Gersht's work casts a broad arc over this history of photographic time, and following a period when the still photograph has come under intense pressure, first by theoretical challenges to its documentary authority and then by the rise of digital and multi media technologies, he has enacted his own form of interrogation, pushing the photographic process and its representational capabilities to technical extremes. Over the last fifteen years or so, Gersht has consistently explored the point at which, submitted to such extremes, the photographic image begins to break down, becomes overburdened – by light, by darkness, by too much information. At this point of the photograph's failing sight, new aesthetic registers of dissolution and dematerialization emerge that, in Gersht's work, becomes analogous to metaphysical space, and to the faltering state of memory beyond the particularities of time and place.

Gersht has always been interested in pre-photographic traditions of representation, and since 2007 he has produced a series of works based on the genre of still life painting that, historically, placed precise realism within a metaphorical framework of moralistic values concerning the transient nature of life and material existence: what is intensely 'present', and beautiful, is also ephemeral; death always lurks amidst the evidence of life. In

photographic and video works such as *Time After Time*, *Blow Up*, *Pomegranate* and *Falling Bird*, Gersht draws these themes into an extended and complex meditation on the nature of time and the recording mechanisms of photography and film. The pivotal element of these works is the sudden and explosive disruption of the slow ‘durational’ time that is both evoked and stilled by the original paintings and reinforced by the motionless photographic frame that mimics them. These disruptions – by a bullet, for example, in the video *Pomegranate* – expose the now quaint artificiality of the still life scene and shift us abruptly into another form of precise analysis, this time one moving through slow, visceral disintegration. In this process a form of compression takes place as we quickly shift from the context of painting to photography’s ‘decisive moment’. But that moment is now extended and minutely examined by film, and as material form erupts into minute fragments we are able to see inside the illusion of the single revealing ‘exposure’. Suddenly, as one dimension of the real is quite literally ‘deconstructed’, another is revealed, and with that comes another form of aesthetic contemplation, which in Gersht’s video works, is a kind of prolonged, ecstatic reverie of seeing (with its hints of voyeurism) in which new forms and configurations of matter startle the imagination.

But the allusions here are also, inescapably, to violent conflict in the contemporary world, and to Gersht’s own cultural proximity to that conflict (the Hebrew words for ‘pomegranate’ and ‘grenade’, for example, are the same). Each disruption embodies the presence of unpredictable and imminent threat, and in this wider context the bullet, the falling bird, the exploding vase of flowers might also be read simply as the blunt intrusions of contingent life into the refined practices and higher moral purposes of art. And, if so, they might echo an urgent call for art to communicate across that apparent divide.

On Reflection

In the seven years or so since Gersht first saw in the still life genre a template for investigation and expression, these ideas have continued to resonate in his work. That paradigm of fragile order, so susceptible not only to time’s slowly corrosive effects but to abrupt shifts of balance that might quickly turn a state of harmony and grace into one of

chaotic disorder, with all its violent overtones, is a durable sign for him. But also, perhaps, the still life represents a continually replenishing wellspring of ideas, drawing the artist back to the same place, to encounter a set of questions never fully answered. In fact the title of Gersht's latest work, *On Reflection*, suggests this sense of reviewing, of looking again. As well as its more literal reference to a mirror, it introduces the idea that some form of reconsideration is taking place, something new seen in a subject already covered. And it invites the proposition that there is an adjustment to be made.

In *On Reflection* that adjustment involves the nature of the image itself, not simply in the way the picture is constituted, what it is we are actually seeing, but in relation to the broader implications that the picture ignites. Once again in Gersht's work, this new film and series of photographs unfolds as a meditation on the operation of the camera and on the illusory and unreliable properties of the images it produces. Yet *On Reflection* envelops the photograph in a further, more layered phenomenological conundrum, one that, quite literally in this case, appears like an apparition in a hall of mirrors.

As with *Blow Up* the new work is based on a specific historical model, this time a set of three flower paintings made by Jan Breughel (the Elder) in the early seventeenth century: *Flowers in a Wooden Vessel* (1606/7), *Flowers in a Vase* (1607) and *Flowers in a Blue Vase* (1608). Breughel's pictures are vivid and meticulously painted studies based on detailed drawings of individual flowers. Yet, despite his evident interest in verisimilitude and a heightened sense of realism, Breughel's paintings are of course idealized visions. In each case the displays could never have existed in reality as the flowers bloom at different times of the year; they are instead aesthetic constructions, a form of exotic perfectionism created by the artist to appeal to the tastes of his affluent patrons. But here, too, as the acute observation of nature overflows into Mannerism, there is the underlying thought of transience, a cautionary moral tone, of all this perfection sending out its signal of subsequent decay through the inevitable passage of time.

Gersht is happy to be drawn into the beguiling spell of these paintings, and it was important for him that his work re-established a relationship with the painstaking

processes of Breughel's art. For *On Reflection* facsimile models of Breughel's flower displays were built over many weeks, the slow durational pace of the making measured in conscious opposition to the instantaneous unraveling and fragmentation of the image that takes place in the final work. But what we see in the triptych of the film, and then again in the still photographs that relate to it, are not direct images of the pristine models but their reflections in a mirror. Like all Gersht's films since *Blow Up*, the seamless and illusory effect of this central aspect of the work was achieved through an elaborate process of planning, material construction and photographic experimentation, in which ideas evolved alongside technical problem solving in laboratory-like conditions. In this particular case the model flower arrangements were placed in a specially built, mini-studio space, all the surfaces of which – floor, ceiling and sides – were lined with mirrored glass. The apparently still, reflected images that begin each film in the triptych, all uncanny representations of the original paintings, were achieved through the careful masking and positioning of the camera. But, as in Gersht's previous still-life film works, once the viewer's attention has been fully reigned in by the strange luminous realism of the still image – the flowers so present and yet so ghostly – the durational spell of passing time is violently broken, here by a sudden shattering of the main mirror. And, as the mirror and its reflected image of the flowers fracture in slow motion, a kind of chain reaction of visual effects occurs as the churning, mirrored glass fragments begin to pick up a kaleidoscopic interplay of reflections moving all around the space.

So, the one complete reflected image of the flowers is broken into multiple, disjointed details, each one now a kind of single jagged screen that, as the mirror slowly disintegrates, still monitors an element of that evolving kaleidoscopic event. It is another reverie of seeing, but what is distinctive about *On Reflection* is how the effect serves to disorientate, or re-constitute vision. The mental image of the flowers is still there in shifting residual form, each mirrored fragment an echo, or a memory of the whole. But now perspective is re-ordered across the broken mirror's many interlocking and variable planes of focus; the visual field is simultaneously one of flatness faceted by pockets of indeterminate depth. It is a complex form of pictorial space in which there are many echoes from modernist and early abstract painting, and especially from the kind of

chromatic cubism practiced by artists such as Robert Delaunay, although in Gersht's work colour is always in the process of being consumed by an encroaching spatial void of darkness.

The abrupt transition from one form of representation to another that the breaking of the mirror in Gersht's work enacts also recalls that radical moment in Cubist painting when pictorial devices such as linear perspective and chiaroscuro were liberated from their descriptive function, most importantly by Picasso in his first fully formed cubist pictures of 1909-10. For Picasso, as David Cottington has pointed out, 'this followed a deepening interest in the linguistic character of pictorial expression – both in the ways that its conventions and components functioned, and, following Mallarmé, in its incantatory power and magical transformative capacities'. As the art historian Yve-Alan Bois has in turn suggested, Picasso's monumental development might best be understood in semiotic terms, 'as a shift from one kind of visual sign to another – from 'iconic' signs, which depend on resemblance to their pictorial subjects, to 'symbolic' signs, which depend instead on their place within a *system* of signs of which the picture is composed...' In the blurred, jagged edged fragments of Gersht triptych film and still photographs, colour, the palette of the original images, becomes at once the 'symbolic' sign, and the remaining vestige, the memory, of the reflected images of the flowers. But, importantly, in the film that eruption of a new visual order is already in the process of falling apart. Only as brittle as the glass on which it is formed, it shimmers and vibrates and collapses into nothing, a few last shards of pristine, in-focus reflection angling toward the viewer before finally becoming part of the image debris that accumulates on the threshold of black empty space.

The brittle, fragile materiality of the mirror, so fundamental to the felt effects of *On Reflection*, extends, too, beyond these representational and phenomenological ideas to connect Gersht's work to other narratives of the past where the shattering of glass is often closely associated with moments of rupture in social history. They are moments in which glass figures as a delicate symbol of all that is most refined in human civilisation, the

breaking of glass being an attendant, contrary metaphor for our capacity for persecution and self-destruction.

Breaking glass, for example, is often linked to instances of iconoclasm. In 1547, during the English Reformation, the royal order to remove and destroy all relics, images, pictures and shrines from churches was radically extended to include images 'in glass windows'. Although they did not have a functional role in worship, the new injunction to destroy the precious medieval stained glass was a symbolic escalation of the reforming process and a marker in time, one 'heavy with portent for the outlawing of all imagery' and for the course of English culture. And, in Germany the events of the 9th and 10th of November 1938, in which Jewish homes, schools, hospitals, shops and business were attacked with sledgehammers, and many Jews were killed and injured, is known as *Kristallnacht*, or The Night of Broken Glass, after the shards of glass that lined the streets in the aftermath of the attacks. *Kristllnacht*, with its dual images of human frailty and brutality bound together in the shattered glass, is also seen as a turning point in history, when the Nazi's persecution of the Jews changed from an economic and political process to violent physical repression.

Ori Gersht has said that his work is motivated, fundamentally, by a desire to reach out to the past, to hold on to stories and to memories that are, like photographs exposed to light, gradually fading, slowly being erased and corrupted by time. The competing, dialectic relationship between remembering and forgetting reverberates throughout his art. In accounting for his experience of 9/11 Robert Storr dwelt on the ways in which the multiple images of the events of that day have affected his own memories: 'Although I believed at the time that what I had witnessed would be indelibly etched in my mind, since then I have been forced to contend with the ways those traces are now crowded by, and to a certain extent conflated with, the thousands of other images of the same situation seen from different angles through different lenses.' For Storr the paradox of an event so well documented by so many, is that the closer the available photographs appear to bring him to aspects of what he directly saw, 'the farther away my experience of that day seems to become, the more remote and – when such an image roughly approximates my own

recollection – the less sharply defined even my most vivid recollections are.’ In the more angular cadences of *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes is characteristically more emphatic: ‘Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory...it actually blocks memory, becomes a counter memory.’ And, he goes on, ‘The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed...’

In Gersht’s *On Reflection*, we are, once more in his work, assaulted by an almost overwhelming degree of visual information. Working at the cutting edge of technology, and again probing inside the ‘decisive moment’ in which the mirror is fractured and falls apart, his camera miraculously records a level of detail that our eyes could never register. Nevertheless what we see is exactly what transpired in front of the camera lens. As the vivid reflections of Breughel’s supremely ordered flower displays splinter into distorted fragments, we confront a form of visual anarchy, and the subject of the work becomes not the paintings or their uncanny simulacra hovering on the screen, but the broken mirror and the new unpredictable system of visual signs it releases.

The common reverie of the artist and spectator in watching this random, fractal-like spectacle, with its myriad historical echoes from the smashing of stained glass to haunting sights and sounds of *Kristallnacht*, is also, paradoxically, a distancing, a denial of proximity. Like the artist who set the process in motion, we can only watch as the spectacle disintegrates before our eyes, and in many ways a sense of violence and obliteration is replayed. In its shattering state the mirror is fully ‘exposed’ as a material surface; it is in some complex sense more vulnerable than the fugitive image that it reflects. The mirror is like a photographic print, perhaps torn in anger, whose mute captured image similarly exists in a time and space that is forever out of reach for us. The subject in the photographic image is always past; the reflection in the mirror is always present, yet both are unattainable, untouchable. For Ori Gersht, the distance between our material, sensory world and that of the image we contemplate ‘is like an abyss that cannot be traversed’, and yet, particularly in relation to memory, it is a space that *On Reflection* enters and attempts to fathom.

