

STEFANIE BAUMANN

Approaching Trust and the unfolding dialogue

Before being involved in the *Trust and the Unfolding Dialogue* research project, I had been working closely with Esther Shalev-Gerz for about 5 years as her personal assistant. From the beginning our encounter has been intense and challenged my way of perceiving art, people and history and my process of developing thought in heterogeneous ways. One thing that always struck me is how Shalev-Gerz interacts with others without pejorative regarding their status or origin. She addresses everyone with the same respect and directness. Being in dialogue seems not a special situation but the most natural state for her. In our work we were constantly exchanging, thinking together and trusting one another in more than “just” a professional way and I always admired how this attitude also shines through her artworks. They mirror the ways she intuitively constructs relationships.

When we first began to develop *Trust and the Unfolding Dialogue*, I feared her projects were too familiar to allow me to develop critical distance to them. However, our collaboration had already ended and I no longer worked with her. I then saw this project as an opportunity to step back, change perspective and reconsider her work from a more philosophical point of view and thus conceptualize what I had previously seen and experienced.

These three years have been very intense. Firstly, I felt I had to explore other artists’ and thinkers’ works in order to find a personal “degree zero” of our investigation and to find a different entry to Shalev-Gerz’s works. My inquiry of *Trust and the Unfolding Dialogue* thus meets her projects at different moments. As I came across these notions and their multiple interweaving through her works and our collaboration they were its starting point but also came to operate as significant intercessors to my own thinking.

Trust and the unfolding dialogue

Trust is, above all, a strong, deep feeling of assurance, “often based on inconclusive evidence”ⁱ. It is synonymous to reliance, faith, confidence, hope and sometimes dependence. While it implies an ongoing relationship with somebody or something one trusts in, it means an immanently present state of mind even if constructed across time and lasting for a long period. It permanently holds the possibility of changing in intensity or even of changing completely and turning into its contrary. Trust is always addressed to an Other, be it a person or an object, to

the circumstances of life or a particular situation or to moral imperatives or political issues. Because one trusts another he or she aims to act in specific ways, dares to do something he or she would otherwise have feared to do. Trust is something like an invisible, fragile ribbon and an element by which social and intimate relations are constructed.

A dialogue is, in its most common means, a conversation between two or more people. Etymologically, it means “through speech” (from *διά* or *dia*, meaning “through, inter” and *λόγος* or *logos*, meaning “speech, oration, discourse”). It thus has to do with the act of speaking, with language as a medium for communication and the voice as its bodily expression. It includes the encounter of two or more people based on acts of speaking and listening. It does not denote speech as such, but what appears *through* it: expression, knowledge and imagination, the construction of a relationship but also understanding, inspiration, affection. Through speech - and also silence, distance, the unsaid - memories can become present and we may possibly travel to other places or perceive images, sounds, smells, tastes or sensations. As with the notion of trust, the notion of dialogue implies the means of addressing someone in the present moment and is based on relatedness. Dialogue is a constitutive element of encounter.

Yet, the dialogue focused on in this writing and put in a dynamic relation with trust is a particular one that perhaps also stresses a specific ability of dialogue as such. It is *unfolding* in at least two ways: firstly unfolding itself, which means that it is somehow “pleated” and subject to permanent change of form and content. Secondly, it not only embraces multiple elements but also shows various intertwining aspects in relation to the actual state of the fold. The notion of an unfolding dialogue can also be understood as a means of unfolding something else, as an instrument for the deployment of thoughts (as stressed by Heinrich von Kleist’s text: *On the Gradual Construction of Thoughts Through Speechⁱⁱ*), knowledge (as per the platonic dialogues), images and mental states (such as trust). *Trust and the unfolding dialogue* thus demarcates a sort of map in a Deleuzian and Guattarian senseⁱⁱⁱ, depicting the space opening up between and through these two notions, connected by the “and”. We are already in a challenging field constructed by their juxtaposition, their heterogeneous internal links and the multiple questions that arise through their proximity. This field is far from being stable and permanent; it is taken in a particular state of *becoming* in a Deleuzian sense, “Becoming is the pure movement evident in changes between particular events. This is not to say that becoming represents a phase between two states, or a range of terms or states through which something might pass on its journey to another state. Rather than a product, final or interim, becoming is the very dynamism of change, situated between heterogeneous terms and tending towards no particular goal or end-state.”^{iv}

Folds

Through various artistic *dispositifs*, Esther Shalev-Gerz’s artistic projects perform the logic of *unfolding*, by which notions and experiences of dialogue and trust intertwine and fold heterogeneously into one another. This perpetual unfolding offers multiple entries not only to participants but also to those who visit the installations. Appealing to the spectator to enter into a dialogical space, her projects differ considerably from a Debordian sense of spectacle-images. Whereas the society of spectacle confronts us with a constant flux of ungraspable images that create an illusion of real life through various representations and stereotypical identifications, which excludes the possibility of dialogue^v Esther Shalev-Gerz’s images always appear, through their fragmentary nature, as problematization of representation itself. This is why dialogues are never directly represented in her works. We never encounter a face-to-face

situation, or actually attend a dialogical encounter– the dialogical element is always subverted. By activating another kind of perceptive temporality she stresses particular aspects or interrupts feelings of a harmonious flow. The Other never appears as firm identity, expressing his or her interests in socially established ways by taking defined or easily recognizable positions. There are always breaches that resist too simple an understanding or too fast a categorization of the Other. He or she is always captured whilst constructing, questioning or searching and unfolding parts of their being. Instead of detecting or “showing” identities, Shalev-Gerz is interested in the continuous altering of the self, their *becoming* and personal *ways of doing*, as Michel de Certeau would say.^{vi} She reveals the way a person manifests him or herself through the appropriation of concepts, realities and forms and the things that occur through their telling, listening or bodily expressions.

Shalev-Gerz’s artistic practice also differs from projects designed as “socially-engaged art”, which directly intervene in the public realm, by creating concrete encounters of dissimilar social actors in order to discuss political issues and find pragmatic solutions for specific problems.^{vii} Her focus is on the constantly challenging research of the conditions of possibility. Trust, as a fundamental element, never appears as something ordinary but always as a personal and social link that must incessantly be built and protected. Trust and dialogue are never presented as stable, but always as interdependent *becomings* that develop, unfold and challenge each other and in which time plays an important role. She confronts us with long moments of silence, slows down camera speed or extends concentration onto one detail, in order to sensitize us for the singularity of construction of the actual relation. Sometimes she makes us listen to long discourses, focusing on an aspect that seemed trifling. This temporal experience is emphasized through her installations and directly connected to challenging understanding and accentuating the perception of the body and personalized expression.

The artist and the others: engagements

The construction of a dialogical space interwoven with trust actually enters Shalev-Gerz’s projects *before* the artworks exist. The formations of trusting relationships and engagement in an ongoing dialogue, not only with participants but also with the institutions that commission the works, are essential components in almost all of her works. Her projects develop across significant periods of time through encounters with people and familiarization with place and context. The forms develop through “immersion” and interaction and respond to unpredictable circumstances. What seems to be only the preliminary phase of a project is in fact an important part of the whole and engages all contributors.

Still/Film, for example, does not seem to primarily deal with dialogues and trust. The installation includes several peculiar photographs of trees, houses, gardens and a film (like a breathing photograph of *Mount Alytus* that in one minute presents the cycle of a day). Those motifs have been captured during investigation: Shalev-Gerz tried to find the house where her deceased mother had previously lived as a child until the age of eight.

For her research, Shalev-Gerz worked closely with a young Lithuanian photographer Petras Saulėnas, to whom she was introduced by the commissioner of the work, the Academy of Arts in Vilnius, where she was invited to teach a workshop about monument and memory. In exchange, Shalev-Gerz asked the academy to research her mother’s previous address in Alytus and to team her with a well-equipped photographer. Petras accompanied the artist on a trip to the neighborhood where she presumed the house to be and by coincidence it transpired that his grandmother lived a few hundred meters from the alleged house of Shalev-Gerz’s

mother. One can have the impression that this constellation shows somehow in the images that seem to be always groping, exploring, and experimenting with different points of view. The camera seems to be searching through a particular lens that renders the image's edges hazy, sometimes focusing on a particular point as an index of their investigation, thereby stressing the complicity of their encounter.

What becomes arguable through this example is that the *becoming* of trust and dialogue is revealed in the artworks themselves and an essential basis for the whole process by which Shalev-Gerz creates an underlying condition for possibility. Therefore, the end of the artistic process is not (only) the finalization of an artwork, but also the production of an explicit dialogical space. Considering the participants as collaborators, as equals, the projects develop horizontally. In his text, originally produced for the catalogue of Shalev-Gerz's *MenschenDinge. The Human Aspect of Objects*, Jacques Rancière writes: "one is never intelligent except with the intelligence one grants to others – those to whom one speaks and those about whom one speaks."^{viii} This fundamental confidence in the Other's intelligence, in the Other's sincerity and creative potential, is something like the degree zero of Esther Shalev-Gerz's work.

Solitudes: Listening to oneself

[I]n all saying (and I mean in all discourse, in the whole chain of meaning) there is hearing, and in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it, a listening. Which means: perhaps it is necessary that sense not be content to make sense (or to be logos), but that it wants also to resound. ^{ix}
Jean-Luc Nancy

In a busy shopping mall in Bergsjön, a suburb of Gothenburg, projected onto one of the walls in the passage between the stores, one could see a single person, then another. Each had been filmed in an intimate room mostly in their homes, sometimes surrounded by personal effects. The persons depicted sat on floors or chairs, or next to a window; lying on a couch or bed, or standing in front of something seemingly important to them. No one looked directly into the camera. They all seemed somehow absent, concentrated, introvert, perhaps lonesome. Some were smiling, others melancholic but each participant seemed to be somehow elsewhere. Silent, the video focused on discreet movements of the body, apparently occurring over a lengthy period of time.

The viewer seemed to simultaneously encounter at least three spaces—firstly his or her own personal space surrounded in a "public space" open to everybody (this shopping mall was in fact the only so-called public space in Bergsjön at the time); secondly the filmed person's private environment and thirdly an insinuated and intimate interior space, the one emphasized by the artist as exclusively reserved for the participants, which remains distant. We can only sense the existence of this third space through the bodily presence of the participants and their somewhat aloof appearance. The spatial and mental coexistence of different spaces in the *dispositif* of this installation stresses the private nature of this inner space. Visibly, the filmed people rely on the artist's intention to not disturb an intimate meeting with themselves. Although physically exposed to the viewer's eyes, their intimacy remains their own affair. The discreetness, slowness and silence of the installation are in strong contrast with the busy, noisy

surroundings of the mall. It is as if, through the images, an *other space*, conditioned by the mutual trust of the artist and the participants, was opening: secret but not hidden, pervaded by a different temporality, this indicated inner landscape, mute and invisible to others, is incorporated by the body, the facial expressions and the gestures of those that linger there.

The participants of *The Place of Art* have actually been filmed while listening to themselves. Beforehand Shalev-Gerz had asked two questions, "According to you, what is art?" and "Where is the place that art can possibly happen?" One of these possible places seems to be this inner area. In this part of the installation – the other element having been shown in a renowned art institution, Gothenburg's Konsthall – their answers are almost absent. No sound accompanies the visuals. Nevertheless, fragments of what was said reappear discreetly in the image through another form, as part of the physical living place itself: sculpted letters forming sentences, declarations, thoughts about what art is or should be seem to emerge through the walls or come out of the furniture. Those written words transform what was spontaneously said into manifest objects or traces, which seem to naturally integrate into the environment. These fragments thus appear as a permanent part of the private space, unlike the spoken words that remain ephemeral; they appear as something that can be adopted and thus be inscribed in the private life, something that is not yet shared with others. Just as a statement, a reduction of the flux of thoughts and the forming of the arguments, these words become a sort of quintessence of the answer but without replacing it: the *becoming* of the sayings, the evolution (or re-evaluation) of the ideas as reflected in the faces persists as internal ongoing movement echoed in the physical body.

Nonetheless, what the participants are actually listening to remains confidential. Their recorded words, pronounced in their own *way of saying*, are not accessible to the spectator of the installation. The emphasis is shifted onto their bodies, onto their physical reactions to their own, but externalized words. It is a very particular situation, where the listener is at the same time the teller, him/herself and an Other. One basic condition for the construction of such a fragile situation is trust: trust in the artist's ability not to violate the intimacy, not to abuse this situation in its fragility; trust in the capacity of the image to give an access to people's most private zone without exposing them inquisitively, trust in the participants' intention of engaging in the scenery.

In Esther Shalev-Gerz's projects, this *dispositif* of dissimilar, superimposed encounters in several stages - including firstly speaking to participants, followed by their listening to their own recorded voices - re-occurs in different forms. In *First Generation*, the faces of the participants (immigrants from all over the world, now living in Sweden) were filmed listening to their own voices in such extreme close-ups that identification became almost impossible. We are confronted with a challenge of closeness and distance that shifts attention to the individuality of the filmed person. Through slow camera movement the viewer encounters unusual proximity to the skin, its distinguishing marks and nuances of color and texture made more apparent than would be usual. Faces do not appear as recognizable portraits but emerge through fragmented details; sometimes small movements of eyes or a mouth become visible. It is a view on the Other that we ordinarily know only from our closest relationships, closeness reminiscent of intimate encounters. With this intimacy, the person previously described and categorized as immigrant re-becomes a unique, physical person - an Other. The *dispositif*, by rendering the stereotypical assignment impossible through the proximity of the faces, reopens the undisguised view on the person behind them. Those faces are more than "immigrants" – a notion that includes numerous connotations. They are seized as subjects through this intimate moment of encounter with their own voices and words.

Something strong emerges through this meaningful silence and the contemplative situation captured by the camera, where one is confronted by their own words, with simultaneity of being-there and actual thoughts and past expressions; as if by excerpting the voice out of the inside and returning it as something foreign, a part of themselves would be deprived and given back in a converted form. One finds him or her simultaneously inside and outside, exteriorized and interiorized, speaking and listening, addressing an Other and addressed by oneself. The silence of the situation is therefore filled with encounters (possible and real ones), imagination and thoughts. “Silence, in the films of Esther Shalev-Gerz,” writes Jacques Rancière, “is never an empty space; it is always an uneven landscape.” A landscape that creates a possible place for encounter with an Other, a platform of trust for accessing a re-assigned interior landscape, an intimate place, as Bachelard would say^x, a *no man’s land*.

No man’s lands

“Since my earliest youth,” writes the Russian author Nina Berberova in her novel *The Revolting Reed*, “I have believed that every person in this world has his *no man’s land*, where he is his own master. There is the existence that is apparent, and then there is the other existence, unknown to everyone else, that belongs to us without reserve.[...].”^{xi} *The Revolting Reed* tells the story of a woman, separated from her lover during World War II and their disappointing encounter after several years during which the narrator had never given up hope of their coming back together. The *no-man’s land* she describes constitutes her intimate meeting place with him where she is free to decide who or what may enter, despite the difficult external political and social conditions; an inner space of liberty and hope, where she finally meets, above all, herself.

Jean-François Lyotard quotes this paragraph as an introduction to his short text *The General Line*. In his thinking the image of a personal and boundless *no man’s land* turns into a truly political issue: “The right to this *no man’s land* is the most important human right. Humanity is only human when all individuals have this ‘country without man’ for themselves, this *no man’s land*.”^{xii} The personal inner landscape is conceived as a refuge from political and social life, it is fundamentally *other*, always singular, intimate and divided from the societal world. “The region is secret because it is set apart. The right to this second existence is the right to remain separate, not to be exposed, not to have to answer to others.”^{xiii}

According to Lyotard, this inner region, essential to humanity, even if free and personal, remains fragile and needs protection. Different attempts to violate or intrude are thinkable; firstly, those committed by totalitarian states trying to control not only external life but also to influence the most private part of its citizens, their minds. But Lyotard identifies another danger to the *no man’s land*, which occurs in our liberal democracies, relating to freedom of expression and the declaration of human rights - the right to speak, to stand up for one’s rights can easily turn into obligation to always verbalize what one feels and is convinced of: “A small rise in pressure, and that will be it for our hours of secrecy. Each person will be seized by others, by responsibilities, caught up in defending the proper enjoyment of his or her rights in general life, diverted from his or her guard over the ‘general line’ that belongs to him or her. This is a kind of proof that exercising one’s right and making sure they are respected can come to be exacted as a duty, as infallible a proof as any that a totalitarian order can supply.”^{xiv}

Lyotard is certainly not opposed to the right to expression, allowing everybody to rise to speak whenever he or she considers the will or need for it. But he also sees risk to integrity when one feels obliged to do so and for the right to become a duty. "If we do not preserve the inhuman region where we can encounter this or that something, that which completely escapes the exercise of rights, we do not deserve the rights granted to us. What use is the right of freedom of expression if we have nothing to say but what has already been said? And how can we have any chance of finding a way to say what we don't know how to say if we don't pay attention to the silence of the other inside us? This silence stands as an exception to the reciprocity that characterizes rights, but it is its legitimation. We should indeed accord an absolute right to this 'second existence' because it is what provides the right to have rights."^{xv}

The *no man's land* as understood by Lyotard is absolutely fundamental, not only as a possible unconditional retreat from social life and as an opportunity of restoring what Berberova calls the *general line* of a person; but also as a place where one gets to know his or her inner thoughts through the liberty of *not* verbalizing anything directly. Silence seems to be part of this knowledge and the condition of possibility of personal integrity. Silence, as a possible space for encounter with oneself, is understood as a necessary framework for this particular process of *becoming*, a becoming that, while being situated outside of the social and political world, has repercussions onto relations. This is why it is linked to freedom. The freedom to speak includes its other, the freedom *not* to speak, to disappear for a while; to step out of society, its logics and responsibilities.

In her works, Shalev-Gerz holds onto the dialectics between silence and speaking, listening and telling. Even if almost all of her works begin with a sort of dialogue, they always include elements linked to the trust in the other's *no man's lands* that allow participants and spectators to step apart. Confronting the spectator by people being with themselves appears here as a political issue. Central is the right to remain silent and to re-organize one's inner space whenever it seems necessary. In order to be together, to share something with an Other, it is as important to accord them the fundamental right to initiate borders and to retreat from the situation, to decide at each moment how much one engages in the ongoing relation. Therefore, being together doesn't exclude the possibility of being alone when the basis of trust in each other and the relationship is strong enough.

For Shalev-Gerz, approaching a person means to consider their privacy as an important element of the encounter itself and therefore to protect the fragility of the situation by never exposing him or herself as a whole. Fragmentations – the separation of words and images, or extreme close-ups – play an important role and indicate that what we see and listen to is still *becoming*, constantly forming and always singular.

Unfolding Silence

In Shalev-Gerz's work, silence appears not only as a lack of words, but also as an active and positive construction of a space of *becoming* – becoming oneself, building trusting relations, forming and unfolding dialogue.

In the 2005 version of *Between Listening and Telling*, another aspect of silence and its connection to personal inner landscape is given focus. She worked with sixty interviews of Auschwitz survivors, varying in duration from two to nine hours, which were made available in

entirety via individual DVD-players and headphones, used by one person at a time, creating intimacy between listener and the person giving testimony. As Georges Didi-Huberman puts it, the witness seems to speak directly into the spectator's ear, just like a whisper.^{xvi} The other element of the exhibition included three large screens showing excerpts of interviews. The same person appeared on each screen, with a gap of seven seconds between the images. These sequences visibilize moments during interviews when the person *does not* speak: the moment just before or after the spoken word, between their listening to the question and response. Made present are hesitations and thoughts, experiences that traverse body and face, indicating the appearance of memories or reflections other to those able to be verbally articulated, yet capable of providing access to "this terrible power of recording the body has and which turns the pain into something contemporary of all our life time when we have suffered."^{xvii} These moments when one finds oneself alone with pain, despair or questioning occur at a different level from pronounceable experiences, revealing that a person is always more than their "function" as a witness. The films were slightly slowed down to extend moments when these traces of an involuntary memory, as Proust would put it, cannot be translated into language. "The silences shown and edited by Esther Shalev-Gerz are not simply failures of speech on the part of the witnesses", writes Didi-Huberman. "They are moments of transition, dialectic in-fills, scansion in the tempo of history itself."^{xviii}

Silence, in her work, is therefore an opening up of space for a particular kind of understanding not only of the body and its expressions. Indeed, its role of remembering and thinking does become present, but also things that are *not* said, that have to remain private for one reason or another, become palpable. I have already mentioned the importance of the retreat from "saying" and its relations to the privacy of *no man's lands*. However, silence also suggests things that cannot be spoken out loud because what is expressed there doesn't concern the intelligible, but touches something other than the linguistic world, or because what could be said has internal restrictions. Michel Foucault writes:

"Silence itself – the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses"^{xix}

Many of Shalev-Gerz's projects invite an enquiry of different silences without trying to penetrate their meaning, without categorizing them into representative types. The important thing to consider, first of all, is that something *is* happening and then to seize *what* happens through the silence itself, to perceive the particular force through bodily reactions and not to reduce them to symptoms of underlying truths. This is how the spectator acquires sensorial access to what remains silent, what is not actually articulated but still shines through the spoken word: in a sense 'the other' of the spoken word. Silences act as an actual, physical state and as indices of inner movements and the building of sense(s). One important condition towards perception not only of what is told but also what doesn't appear through language and the voice, is listening.

Listening

The word and the image are not two separate things. The voice is always that of a body that can see and be seen, addressing another body that can see and be seen. And the silence that interrupts, precedes or listens to it is not the refuge of the all-powerful thinking that is hidden from the fools or voyeurs. On the contrary, it is the mark of her difficult task of converting one sensitive into another sensitive.
Jacques Rancière^{xx}

It seems, in Shalev-Gerz's works, that we are regularly confronted with something that looks like a part of a dialogical situation: someone is listening to someone's words. In the examples described, we are meeting such a situation without really attending it. We do not take part in the dialogue, rather we only have access to one division of it. Instead of hearing the discourse, we see it. What we see is how another listens, what happens physically to him as he concentrates on spoken words. Can a dialogue be perceived through the act of seeing? Can we seize the dynamics of *unfolding* – unfolding, through the shifting of our concentration, what takes place *through speech*? By lacking pronounced language as medium, we access its other: the image, the body and the process of listening itself. Through the sensorial, by becoming reflexive, one seizes the process of making sense. Those viewing the installation mirror what is depicted in it. The visitors share an experience with the participants as both are simultaneously receptive and active in the construction of meaning.

"In its philosophical scope, listening involves the renunciation of a predominantly molding and ordering activity; a giving up sustained by the expectation of a new and different quality of relationship"^{xxi}, writes Gemma Corradi Fiumara in her book *The other side of language: A philosophy of listening*. Listening, as a serious act of thinking, of producing a specific kind of knowledge, is to be understood here as a particular position that allows a different approach to intellectual and intuitive comprehension from the conceptual construction of logical reflection. It opens an uncertain space where one is receptive not only to differing kinds of understanding, but also for other means of articulation. "One of the most important aspects of listening is the fact discernable when cognitive frontiers are opened up without any 'frontal' attack, but only in relation to our availability to listen rigorously; as if our determination to go forward tentatively without knowing exactly our direction, but sustained by the readiness to listen – almost osculate something muffled – were exactly what opens the way for the birth of thought. In the readiness to understand there is precisely an effort to follow up the inner consequentiality of someone's expression: the disposition that gives life to a 'listening event'. The thing experienced itself becomes capable of utterance insofar as the interlocutor opens himself to the strength of thought springing to life in other, free from the cognitive claims provided by his own interpretative parameters.

If we reach the point of discerning a consequential thread in the utterance of 'the other' over and beyond apparent fragmentation, listening is then converted into a maieutic process; this emergent consequentiality in which the fragments of one's own interior world organize themselves, perhaps represents thinking in the process of its formation. It is an activity which begins to distinguish itself from a flow of affects and which at the same time expresses itself as genuine thinking, because it is not passively introjected from external sources of utterance."^{xxii}

While listening much happens in the listening body and interior space: thoughts, emotions and links are triggered and formed dynamically in the process of becoming through the transformations of the ongoing relationship. By focusing on portraits of listeners, Esther

Shalev-Gerz stresses the active role of a position that is often perceived as passive. Here, we may follow the construction of reflexivity. However, our own position in meeting her installations, the experience that is triggered through them, is reflected in what we see: in seeing the active listening of an Other, our own attention to it, as an active process, is emphasized.

In *Does Your Image Reflect Me?* two participants are represented at once as listener and teller. One screen shows their discourse, a second depicts them listening to the words of the other. The two women are almost the same age and without knowing each other have shared an era. Isabelle Choko spent the last years of the Third Reich in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, Charlotte Fuchs a few kilometers away, in Hannover. Each woman talks for over forty minutes about her individual experiences during these dark times. It is something like a double portrait: the one of the listening person seems to show complementary facets of the person telling. Curiously, one has the impression of facing four rather than two people. The portrait of Choko speaking differs greatly from the portrait of her listening. While her telling, in broken German, shows almost childlike charm and personal fragility; as she listens to Charlotte Fuchs's story her face remains withdrawn, reserved, somehow severe, as if the process of listening needed more protection than the telling of her own cruel history. In contrast, while speaking Charlotte Fuchs appears to be very self-reliant and clear, she reacts more visibly to Choko's words. Touched, she follows the other's story with emotive reactions. The doubling of these two portraits disturbs a too obvious illustration of their personalities, triggering an imposture, an opening. In this device, the spectator is literally placed "between listening and telling" – between two complementary aspects of a person (expressing herself through words and reacting to the words of another), in-between a deconstructed dialogue between two persons (which has never been a real dialogue, as they listened to each other's recording on their home televisions).

Shalev-Gerz's installations are always more than an exhibition of stories, witnesses or identities. Each introduces a process of becoming-other, the force of transformation inherent to interaction and simultaneously a reflection of the position of the visitor, a complex and on-going altering of the perception of oneself and an Other. Her portraits are always doubled and thus trail away their evident nature, introducing the need for perpetual construction, problematization and questioning of the viewers' own experiences.

Unfolding questions

As previously stated, most of the dialogical situations in Shalev-Gerz's work start with questions asked by her. It is important to take a closer look at the specific nature of these. Shalev-Gerz herself describes them as follows: "For me, a question is a trigger, a starter, initiating a dialogue. I think it's the most democratic mode of interaction, in the current sense of the word, insofar as the question brings out the *Other*. These are not directive or very precise questions: they are open, almost inexhaustible. They are the kind of questions you can keep on asking and keep answering. As Godard might put it, 'These questions are not just ones, they're just questions.'" ^{xxiii} We are very far away from a common sociological inquiry as a search for specific answers to a predefined topic. The questions appear as propositions, as invitations to engage in a dialogue *without* asking for "appropriate" answers. They are a means of generating expressions and to trigger the process of *unfolding*.

Gilles Deleuze once claimed: “The aim is not to answer questions, it is to get out of it.”^{xxiv} Esther Shalev-Gerz’s questions are also a method of “getting out” of them. Her real interest lies in what opens up *through* them, through different understandings, affects and intuitions of what could possibly emerge from encounter. The questions usually disappear from, or into, the work: the reactions to them forming an area of political and social conditions by which to access a particular subject that then arises.

In *The Place of Art*, the other part of the installation that I have not yet described, was exhibited at Gothenburg’s Konsthall. It included a soundtrack of the participants’ voices answering a second question, “What would be for you a place of art?” Some of the participants evoke their wish for a local cultural center; others talk about their kitchen as actually their “real” place of art. They claim it is the room where they have the best light conditions or is most quiet. The answers to the question about a place of art shift from institutional understandings to private connotations, thus embracing different meanings of how art relates to space and life. Through the participants’ responses a sort of unexpected conceptual and sensorial landscape emerges: the openness of the questions allowing for political issues to surface. The meaning of these open questions deploys with their answers. They appear to be a trigger for what it is the participants perceive as the most urgent topic.

Portraits of Stories shows this *unfolding* of implicit political and social issues through one very open question. In Marseille and Aubervilliers in France, Skoghall in Sweden and Sandwell in the UK, Shalev-Gerz asked more than 200 people the same simple question, “What story must be told today?” Each participant chose a place where he or she wanted to be filmed. The outcomes, through the individual statements of the participants, show something akin to portraits of these places but also induce a deeper dimension. The confrontation with such diverse definitions of what may constitute a “story” and “today” leads directly to further questions raised through juxtapositions. The initial question appears, through the responses, as a rhizomatic germ of potential thoughts that continuously multiply. Through speech, and not through the preceding question, problematization of the subjects that initially seemed pre-determined emerge, as if the more essential questions would arise through the answers, through the process of giving meaning to it. The positions of the one interrogating the other seem to be inversed, or at least, to be diluted by the reflections of the answers on the initial subject: the answer gives access to what remained unsaid in the question, of the horizon of meaning it possibly refers to. The collected responses somehow unfold the potential of the question and thus destabilize and problematize the very meaning of the words being used. Esther Shalev-Gerz’s practice relies on the trust and capacity of people to unfold their own concerns in a socially and politically relevant manner. The construction of non-authoritarian dialogical spaces is one way of approaching the *becoming* of problematization apropos the public realm.

On two

On Two, the original title in French being *D’eux* – literally means “about” or “(coming) from them”, which when spoken becomes *deux*, “two”. This work thus evokes both, two “others” in their very singularity and the community they potentially build, even without knowing each other, through coexistence in the same installation. The two people featured in the work seem very different and are presented in dissimilar ways. Rola Younes, a young Lebanese woman speaks deliberately about her life in Beirut and Paris, political and historical situations in

Lebanon and her passion for languages. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière is depicted reading aloud a passage from his text, *The Emancipated Spectator*:

“The collective power shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body, or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other. This shared power of the equality of intelligence links individuals, makes them exchange their intellectual adventures, in so far as it keeps them separate from one another, equally capable of using the power everyone has to plot their own path.”^{xxv}

This dialectic of equality *within* difference, through particular ways of appropriation and construction becomes evident in Shalev-Gerz’s installations. The young woman who dips into different languages in order to understand her own being and to find ways of dealing with her world shows a different but equally profound sensitivity as the philosopher does to other people, objects and concepts. “Everywhere there are starting points, intersections, and junctions that enable us to learn something new if we refuse, firstly, radical distance; secondly, the distribution of roles and thirdly the boundaries between territories”^{xxvi}, says Rancière, while Younes’ describes how she constantly deterritorializes, as Deleuze would say, her own life by diving into languages and cultures and ignoring cultural attributions. Through the production of an edited dialogical space, Shalev-Gerz captures these moments of narrative transition, as a kind of portrait of people’s *becoming*. Again, we are not meeting an actual dialogue - we create this possible dialogue through our presence and between these two protagonists. Rancière and Younes are not actually speaking to each other. The dialogue is constructed through the form of the work itself. Disparate moments are presented as neighbors, as potential echoes of the other and thus another space is convened.

The two, the spaces *in between*, the *becomings* are always essential in Esther Shalev-Gerz’s works. We are never in front of *One*, in front of unities or identities that express themselves from a stable perspective. The people we meet through her work are always in the process of constructing their position, always captured while dealing with something, somebody or themselves. In order to grasp the political impacts of perceiving them, we - the spectators, thinkers and viewers - are invited to enter into those spaces of construction, to share the experience of this fragile productive situation and to sense the essential aspect of trust. We find multiple breaches in Esther Shalev-Gerz’s work— separations of images and sound, of speaking and listening, of a body and words. We additionally find unexpected edits that reconstruct other fields of perception, other possible *becoming* relations. These ruptures in the constant flow of sensitive and intellectual perception make it impossible to think in identities, in fixed statements or defined territories. Thus, it makes it possible to think the becoming of dialogues, the unfolding of the relationship between trust and dialogue and our presence within it. After three years of being involved in this project, I consider this to be the most inspiring aspect of Esther Shalev-Gerz’s work for my philosophical work: concepts are not only thinkable, they have a sensible stake. Experiencing dialogue through trust, sensing its instability and fragility, allows us to think its actual impacts on politics in a different, very real manner, as categorizing people (as immigrants, survivors, witnesses) always reduces them to specific conditions. Shalev-Gerz’s projects seem to inverse this logic by re-vitalizing their very conditions as a human being: by listening, speaking and looking at them, by editing subversively their expressions in order to shift their appearance in other contexts.

ⁱ See <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Trust>

ⁱⁱ Heinrich von Kleist, *On the Gradual Construction of Thoughts Through Speech*, available online here: http://www.ias-research.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Kleist-and-Hamburger_-_1951_-_On-the-Gradual-Construction-of-Thoughts-During-Speech.pdf, verified 03/23/2013

ⁱⁱⁱ "The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation", Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translation and foreword by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis London, p. 12

^{iv} Cliff Stagoll: Becoming, in: *The Deleuze Dictionary*, edited by Adrian Parr, Edinburgh University Press, 2010 P. 26

^v See Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, Hobgoblin Press Canberra, 2002, § 18 "When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings - dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special pre-eminence once occupied by touch; the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not merely a matter of images, nor even of images plus sounds. It is whatever escapes people's activity; whatever eludes their practical reconsideration and correction. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever representation becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself."

^{vi} See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984

^{vii} See Grant Kester: Conversation Pieces. The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art, in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, second edition, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 153-165

^{viii} Jacques Rancière, The Work of the Image, in *Esther Shalev-Gerz, Jeu de Paume*, Fage éditions, 2010, p. 138

^{ix} Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, Fordham University Press, 2007, p. 6

^x See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. The classic look at how we experience intimate places, Beacon Press, 1994

^{xi} Nina Berberova, *The Revolted Reed*, quoted by Jean-François Lyotard in : *The General Line*, in : Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, UCL Press, 2003, p. 108

^{xii} Jean-François Lyotard, *The General Line*, op.cit, p.108

^{xiii} *ibid.*, p.109

^{xiv} *ibid.*, p.110

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p.111

^{xvi} See Georges Didi-Huberman, *The "Blancs Soucis" of Our History*, in: Esther Shalev-Gerz, catalogue of the exhibition in the Musée cantonal des Beaux Arts de Lausanne, JRP|Ringier, 2012, p.58

^{xvii} « cette terrible puissance d'enregistrement qu'a le corps [et qui] fait de la douleur quelque chose de contemporain à toutes les époques de notre vie où nous avons souffert", Marcel Proust, *Albertine disparue*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989.

^{xviii} Georges Didi-Huberman, *The "Blancs Soucis" of Our History*, i Esther Shalev-Gerz, catalogue of the exhibition in the Musée cantonal des Beaux Arts de Lausanne, JRP|Ringier, 2012, p. 60.

^{xix} Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, Pantheon Books New York, 1978, p. 27.

^{xx} Jacques Rancière, The work of the image, in: *Esther Shalev-Gerz*, exhibition catalogue, Jeu de Paume, Fage éditions, 2010, p. 138

^{xxi} Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language. A Philosophy of Listening*, Routledge, 1990, p.123

^{xxii} *ibid*, p. 143

^{xxiii} Esther Shalev-Gerz, in: interview with Marta Gili, in: *Esther Shalev-Gerz*, Jeu de Paume/Fage Editions, 2010, p. 154

^{xxiv} Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues* (with Claire Parnet), Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 1

^{xxv} Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, read in Esther-Shalev-Gerz's installation *On two*, published in Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, translation:. Gregory Elliot, Verso, London, 2009, p. 16,17

^{xxvi} *ibid.*