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## Sigalit Landau, or Art of the Shore (A Bridge Between Poetry and Politics)

'My work is about building bridges.'<sup>1</sup> With this sentence, a true axiom, Sigalit Landau defines her artistic activity. It is an activity in which she herself suddenly appears to us as a bridge stretching from poetry to politics, from *poiesis* (creation) of artistic production to trying to set out the common good in the diversity of the *polis* in which we live, if that is how we can define politics today.

### A bridge of salt...

The *Phoenician Sand Dance* exhibition undoubtedly allows as many readings as subjects it approaches, but certainly none of them would have remained untouched by the impact it makes on the fact of *having* a body, *having* it before *being* it, before identifying with its unity and its consistency, which are always a little precarious. From the beginning, Sigalit Landau's work addresses the singularity of each person's body as it relates to another body or its environment, its Other (to use the term employed in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis to situate a radical alterity), especially regarding the Other's ways of living and finding satisfaction, their *jouissance*. This Other can be either Other sex or Other culture, the neighbour, and the one which I find so difficult to bear because it is different to me but which also makes me think of what, within myself, is also Other, irreducible to my oneness and my consistency.<sup>2</sup> It is pretty difficult, in fact, to establish a link with this Other, whether interior or exterior, without resulting in reciprocal exclusion. Sigalit Landau's work is a radical attempt to reach this Other – be it the alterity of sex, of another culture, the neighbour, or even the alterity of the body itself – and establish a bridge, knowing that the link with this body is, at times, impossible.

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1 Sigalit Landau, *One Man's Floor Is Another Man's Feelings*. Paris: Kammel Mennour, Les Presses du Réel, 2011, p. 174 [exh. cat.].

2 It is under the impact of this alterity that we can now ask ourselves: 'Which other is this, then, to whom I am more attached than to myself [moi], since, at the most assented to heart of my identity to myself, he pulls the strings?' Jacques Lacan. *Écrits*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1966, p. 524. (Translation of citation by Bruce Fink, from Jacques Lacan. *Écrits*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966.)

3 The last congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis was dedicated to this very reality which escapes all representation, which is at the core of each subject's symptom and which often presents in a traumatic way, which endlessly remains unwritten. See the volume published after the WAP's 10th congress, 'Le réel mis à jour, au XXI<sup>ème</sup> siècle'. Paris: World Association of Psychoanalysis, November 2014.

4 'The salt bridge proposal is a unique, somewhat utopic proposal, for building a bridge that will connect Israel and Jordan at the southern part of the Dead Sea'. Sigalit Landau, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

At this point, the building of bridges ceases to be a metaphor. Or should we say that all the metaphors become entirely real? In fact, as a backdrop to the series of works in the exhibition, lies the project proposed by Sigalit Landau years ago, in an explicit and formal way: the construction of a bridge of salt over the Dead Sea which would connect, from one side to the other, one shore to the opposite, Israel and Jordan (pp. 102-03). Neither more nor less. Very symbolic, you will say. It depends what we mean by symbolic. If by this term it is understood that the symbol is a representation, even the evocation, of a political and social reality – in this case of much conflict – which was already present and which the artist aims to represent with her work, I would immediately say no, it is not at all symbolic. The bridge Sigalit Landau proposes is quite real, as real as the experience she puts into action with her work. It is a real to which she aspires beyond any image or symbolic representation, a real which is distinct from reality itself as we perceive it, and how we normally represent it, a real which psychoanalysis also takes on in its experience.<sup>3</sup> If the proposal to build a bridge of salt over the Dead Sea can be classed as utopia<sup>4</sup> – literally ‘without place’ – it is exactly because the real it is about, the real which art is about, and also necessarily politics – much as it pains us – is a real which is defined by the fact that it has no place but also, as the horizon delineates the sea, makes possible the existence of any space, enabling even the very existence of the place itself.

In fact, like the bridge which Sigalit Landau wants to build, her work is so real that she gives it her all, meaning that she puts her body into it as far as is necessary. That’s not a metaphor, as you can see in one of the best-known works in the exhibition, *Barbed Hula* (2000, p. 36): a video in which she appears, spinning a barbed-wire hula hoop around her body. Beyond all the connotations evoked by the image, without doubt symbolic, it endeavours to show the marks on the body, the trail of a dance which takes place between the blurred boundaries of pain and sensuality. And all of this with the Mediterranean shore as its background. One year earlier, with *Three Men Hula* (1999, p. 30), she had filmed the same dance but with three men spinning a single hula hoop, all three trapped in a kind of internal prison which forces them into an unusual solidarity in the dance.

... where there’s no possible relationship

Writing, body and shore are thus tied together in a work which offers us bridges where symbolic frontiers between One and Other have become impossible.

Between One and Other there is no frontier, nor common measure; in fact, between One and Other there is no possible relationship, unless we dare to build a bridge which creates a network, a place of transition, always marked by a lack of identification. At the same time, frontier places are where the most interesting things happen, the most surprising ones.

Sigalit Landau lives in these places, just as she creates them, putting them into action with her work. Creating a place we can inhabit is the primary function of a bridge when it takes us from One place to an Other. We often think that a bridge connects two already existing banks of a river, two places clearly defined beforehand. It must be understood, however, that a bridge is above all a place, a new place, a place of passage, a threshold; and it is by crossing the bridge that the two banks appear as banks; that it is the bridge which makes them exist, the One and the Other.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a bridge is as symbolic a device as a door or a water tap on a pipe, another of Sigalit Landau's favourite objects. These are objects which allow passage from One place to an Other, from they themselves being a new place. You might say that living on a bridge, in a doorway or inside a tap cannot be very comfortable. But we already live in this new place more than we think... It is the place which in the final analysis globalised civilisation holds in store for us. It's best to know about this and be ready for it as much as possible.

Sigalit Landau does this with her art, which above all is a form of existing, and of being in the world, not just an attempt to represent it: 'I am attracted to places that are disregarded, hideouts, architectural "pockets", informal and "in-between" spaces.'<sup>6</sup> It concerns inhabiting interstitial spaces, places of transit, places where no one would think of stopping but which are necessary in order to move from One space to an Other.

Inhabiting these spaces through art seems impossible, touching a real beyond any representation. But it is this impossibility with which something must be done, if we understand along with Jacques Lacan that the most real is precisely the logically impossible, that which *does not* cease *not* to be written; what does not happen or take place.

In the room where the *Salt Bridge Summit* (2011, p. 84) is housed, you will see that it is possible to do something with the real when it appears impossible to inhabit. The screens of twelve laptop computers arranged on

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5 One must reread, as many times as necessary, Martin Heidegger's subtle text 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' (1951) not to forget the importance of the question: 'What is a bridge?'

6 Sigalit Landau interviewed by Jean de Loisy, op. cit., p. 11.

7 Ibid., p. 93.

a round table reproduce a conversation between twelve participants in a debate over Sigalit Landau's proposal to build a salt crystal bridge over the Dead Sea. The conversation revolves around the disagreement over the environmental, commercial and political implications of the proposal. The most important thing happens underneath the table, where a child tries to establish a link between the participants, tying the shoelaces of each one to those of the next, coupling impossible pairs, coupling what will never become a couple. The little girl makes bridges where the real presents itself as uncoupled, unrelated, until the participants get up from the table – they've been waiting to do so for some time – and have to leave barefoot, as would prisoners of war. The shoes remain in a circle, coupled together in the uncoupling. Symbolic? Perhaps... I tend to see an image of the real which the artist invites us to, time and time again, repeatedly, like videos on loop; an image of the real which also appears in the Lacanian aphorism 'there is no relationship', or 'there is no sexual relationship in the real which can be written'. To put this another way, there is nothing in the nature of human beings to indicate which object is the one predetermined for their sexual drive.

The fact that the exhibition is almost entirely made up of videos projected onto a screen means that the art object paradoxically becomes even less of a representation and turns into an occurrence, an act repeated over and over again, beyond our presence. This repetition is what reminds us even more of the dimension of the unmatched object in each image, not forming a pair with the subject – it is the object which psychoanalysis sets out as object a – but also its partner, with which it will experience its own 'there is no relationship'.

A pair of shoes could in fact be a symbol of this radical unmatching. It's a *pair* of shoes, but that does not then make them a couple. On the other hand, in the video entitled *Salted Lake* (2011, p. 64), one can see the pair of shoes transformed into one of the principal symbols of our contemporaneity, and watch how they slowly sink away. They are covered in salt crystals, like geodes, patiently obtained after submerging them in the salt waters of the Dead Sea. Sigalit Landau, who has found a way to construct art objects through salination, then placed the shoes on the frozen waters of a lake in Gdansk, Poland. The video shows us, in a range of shots filmed over the course of an afternoon, how each shoe gradually sinks into the hole which deepens as the salt crystals and ice crystals jumble into an apparent whole. The two shoes sink, slowly, 'they fall and dive downwards, burdened with history and gravity',<sup>7</sup> slowly but at the same time with a weird speed, natural in an object which has become a symbol through the weight of language, as heavy as history itself, and gravity. Just like two twin towers thrust into their nothingness. It is not difficult to find here the mark of collapse of contemporary

symbols and their ilk, those of an entire civilisation, determined and summed up in a pair of shoes, whether we set them in revolutionary Gdansk or in globalised New York. However it is not a symbol but the very Thing, if in the object of the shoes we recall that lost object which Freud had situated at the very centre of the psychic structure as *das Ding*, the Thing, the object which is unrepresentable but also one harboured within the most hidden identity of each object, inasmuch as it is an object as cause of desire. Only the artist knows how to recover it and give it representation in a process which allows it to participate in beauty, a process known as sublimation.

### *Extimacy*

One of the ways in which this object presents itself in reality is in the interiority which was most hidden and now reveals itself, or also – and here one must build an even less obvious bridge – in the most radical exteriority which is present in the most intimate and interior. Landau invites us to search for this paradoxical space which, being so interior, becomes completely exterior and unknown by its own subject. The neologism created by Jacques Lacan fits very well here, the space of an ‘extimacy’, of an intimacy so intimate that its strangeness makes it exterior.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, we also come upon this *extimate* space in the labyrinths of pipework in the *Water Ladder* (2011), with steps formed by tubes connected by valves, like the skeleton or blood vessels of a building’s body, visible on the outside, turned inside-out like a glove, exteriorising the body’s even more interior interior. In fact, it is a topological operation similar to that which we find in others of Sigalit Landau’s works, such as *Woman Giving Birth to Herself* (2005), or *Ectopic Pregnancy* (2005) with the multiple images of ectopic pregnancy which, through the female body, presents the most intimate object in the most exterior. In the end, is the birth of a child not the maximum experience of the female body? Female sexuality acts here like writing on the shore of the body, where the symbolic frontier, implying correlation between the sexes, is also absent.

We find another version of this operation, a constant in Sigalit Landau’s work, when three naked girls, mermaids, scrape ferociously with their hands – almost their claws – at the sand on a beach after each wave. They inscribe long marks in the sand which the next wave immediately erases. First one,

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<sup>8</sup> And underlined by Jacques-Alain Miller in his 1985–86 course at the Département de Psychanalyse de Paris 8, entitled ‘Extimacy’.

then the next, then another, and then all three together make three lines of furrows as if three human rakes had left signals in the sand on the Mediterranean beach: *Mermaids (Erasing the Border of Azkelon, 2011, p. 78)*.

Who hasn't at some point written a message in the sand on a beach and seen the waves wash it away? Who hasn't watched a wave erase a mark and then made another, between wave and wave, and yet another, so as to follow the intermittent traces of their selves? It is so human that it looks like a children's game. In fact it repeats the first imprint which language – meaning – brings to a being which speaks to make itself appear and disappear in the game of presence and absence, of life and death. As with Man Friday's foot in Robinson Crusoe, it is not the leaving of marks in the sand on a beach which is significant, but the act of erasure from the view of another which gives them meaning as a subject of language, the subject which can then be represented as absent for the Other. Thus, writing is always erasing another inscription in the palimpsest of life itself, if we understand it as an experience of language.

And so the three mermaids write, with their bodies, in the sand on the beach, but they do so in order to erase the frontier of Ashkelon. It is erasure through writing, erasing a frontier to write something else in its place, and to write the body with the body. As Landau explains, the sequence was filmed in one of the most conflictive parts of the world, right by the border between the Gaza Strip and the Israeli town of Ashkelon, and access required special permission from the Israeli army. If it is an area of political conflict, it is precisely because of the impossibility of drawing a true border there, a line which would imply a symbolic pact, representable by language and meaning, a pact of reciprocity between peoples, between different ways of life and *jouissance*.

On the Other side of the room – with a capital letter – there is another video which brings a sandy beach to the exhibition. This time, it concerns three boys – we enter masculine logic – playing a knife game called *Countries*, which is all about drawing and erasing boundaries, imposing them with a knife-thrust in the sand, such that each person preserves their own space by corralling others into theirs. Between the dance, the ritual and the game of infinite rivalry, reciprocity becomes impossible in the definition of borders, of conquest and occupation of territories. The title of the work is *Azkelon* (2011, p. 70), a fusion of Gaza ('Aza' in Hebrew) and Ashkelon in a place of passage.

A question: what bridge could we build between One video and the Other, between the masculine (somewhat phallic) game of rivalry taken to the extreme in the demarcation of frontiers, and the feminine writing which

appears in impossible reciprocity? To tell it as it as we have seen it, passing through the exhibition from one end to the other: seen like this, there is no relationship possible between the sexes; One looks to write frontiers in a metered, measurable space, while the Other writes in a space which cannot be measured, coming from the immensity of the sea and needing to restart again and again. Two different spaces which remind us of the Lacanian aphorism: 'there is no sexual relationship', no correlation, no definable border or possible reciprocity between the sexes.

## A bridge of letters

The fact that this radical alterity emerges from the feminine side is not at all unusual for psychoanalysis. Here, the difference Lacan established between the drawing of *frontiers* and the existence of a *shore*, a *littoral*, is very useful in understanding the importance of the act which Landau brings to us through her work.<sup>9</sup> A frontier assumes a limit, drawn between two territories, two spaces which exist from the moment of drawing as different, each foreign to the other. Before drawing the frontier, there is no possible distinction between the spaces. In fact, without a supposed frontier somewhere, we would not be able to conceive of the space itself. A frontier means two territories exist, such that they can have a reciprocal relationship, with common measure between them, as with currency exchange between two countries. The existence of a shore is something else. If the frontier follows the logic of meaning, which traces symbolic frontiers, the shore follows the logic of letters. The *littoral* is *literal*, a place of inscription in the real of the body. At a shore, a whole dominion has a frontier with no possible passage to the Other side, because there is no Other side which one can actually identify; there is only a cut-off, a discontinuity. The shore is a very unusual frontier as it does not lead to any Other defined place.<sup>10</sup> A frontier meanwhile, as well as demarcating two dominions, presupposes that passage from One to the Other is possible. When there is a frontier, it is because of reciprocity, mutual recognisance. But we know that this is at times – many times, in fact – impossible.

When the frontier becomes impossible, one can try to create a bridge, the beginning of a network, a bridge made of words for instance, of various routes and readings, and not a one-way street – in every sense. Writing, as Lacan elaborated at the end of his teaching, is more linked to femininity and its

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Lituraterre', *Autres écrits*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> This is the experience which, for example, people on one coast or the other of the Atlantic would have had on their side before Columbus first built a bridge with his voyage.

forms of *jouissance*, – distinct from its graphic representation as well as its meaning – and functions as an inscription of the body, and on the body; it is inscribed rather in a non-existent place in the Other, supposing a cut, a true hole in the world of symbols and symbolic representations.

Why go so far with this distinction? Because, with the use of image and symbol, Sigalit Landau's art constructs a new geography not based on frontiers or borders (borders which today show themselves to be powerless to allow an impossible reciprocity between cultures) but on bridges of transit, places of passage with no predefined identity, in a kind of self-exile which, in the end, is healthy. Psychoanalysis also shows this in addressing the space of desire and *jouissance*, beyond identifications based on the ideals which define family and cultural spaces.

Where symbolic frontiers admit their irremediable inconsistency, their impossibility to order populations in the *polis* – even their uselessness when barbed wire and chain link, razor wire forming sinister fences are required to reinforce these impossible frontiers – what better than trying to write on them the littoral of an always Other *jouissance*, a different one? Most certainly, there is good reason why this art of the shore is flowering today in an especially symptomatic way in a coastal place, the shores of the Mediterranean which connect such diverse cities through the bridges of writing.

In the end, the building of a bridge is also a question; always a question about the Other place and what inhabits it, a question of the desire for the Other which incites it.

