

MAKING HISTORIES

MAKING HISTORIES by Vince Leo

FRAMING MEMORIES I NEVER HAD

Walter Benjamin's Angel of History is caught in a line of relationships she can't change. Obsessed with the errors she can see in the past, she is powerless to change them, but not because of her lack of understanding or because she is being constrained by evil. Benjamin's Angel is held in abeyance by something Benjamin calls "a Wind blowing out of Paradise,"¹ which catches her wings and prevents her from moving toward the past. This Wind lies further in the past than the sins of history, an elemental force arising from a preexisting state of goodness, innocence, and natural beauty. The most powerful force in Benjamin's metaphor, the Wind from Paradise is a deeply personal proposition, a mystical belief in the relentless assertion of righteousness in the universe. But it is also that very Wind—actually the misunderstanding of Paradise in the shape of Progress—that lies behind the human catastrophes Benjamin's Angel yearns to mend. Her tragedy isn't that she can't mend the past, but that she can't perceive the nature of the Wind that paralyzes her, and so can't see the development of human consciousness for all its transgressions, can't understand that the past can never be fixed, only be redeemed with the aid of that Wind in the present for the future.

Like Benjamin's Angel, Dorit Cypis struggles with the sins of the past, unwilling to forget. Through her use of historical representations, Cypis has wrestled with the continuing power of the past to effect the present through the circumstances of the female body (X-Rayed (Altered), My Father's Nudes) and the creation of human identity (The Body in the Picture). Like Benjamin himself, Cypis's understanding of time and human history is radical and mystical, exhibiting a dogged faith in the transcendent power of sensuous experience and the undeniable order of beauty. Cypis's past doesn't begin and end with human history, but includes something more, something beyond and before, something unseen and unknowable. Call it a spark of eternal optimism or a Wind blowing from Paradise, it moves through Cypis work and back into the world of human destinies.

Nowhere is this interweaving of historical catastrophe within the forces of good more apparent or more defiant than in Framing Memories I've Never Had. Constructed as a rigorously conceptual slide show whose linear nature is continuously interrupted by overlapping frames, double projections, and white-out dissolves, Framing Memories begins with the joys of making and the mysteries of seeing. Almost without warning, human relationships formed out of these activities, are complicated by historical representations, and begin to sour. At the center of Framing Memories lies historical catastrophe in the shape of photographs of the Holocaust, the great sorrow of modern experience, beyond changing, beyond forgetting, beyond redemption.

But just when it seems all is lost, Cypis stands witness to a Wind of Paradise bringing something else to the world. It's not a simple statement of goodness, but a discovery of order: lakes and trees, photographed as simple symmetric reflections, repeated over and over again until everyday visual experience becomes proof of impossible beauty. In that split second of clarity elongated into fierce repetition, we witness what Benjamin held onto with such tenacity: the faith in goodness in spite of and in the presence of human moral failure. Cypis finds the Wind through the unpredictable cross currents of seeing and making, and by doing so returns Paradise into the realm of human activity. The liberating force of making allows Cypis to disengage the inescapable relational logic of Benjamin's vision and turn her back to the past. Watching a new logic take shape, we join Cypis, in memory of the past, transfixed by Paradise, but now free to turn and face the future, human again, Angels of History no more.

OUT OF TIME

In some ways, Dorit Cypis's installation Out of Time feels like a mini-retrospective of twentieth century art history. There is the surrealism of the massive plywood sheets, the abstraction of lamb's wool on one wall, the minimalism of the fleece rectangle, and the conceptual feminism of the small 1" x 1" video screens. But like ideas and art, materials have histories also, none more associative than the plywood and lamb's wool of Out of Time. Plywood is one of the most used and least seen of all contemporary building materials, utilized as forms for concrete, underflooring, and roofing. Lamb's wool has a history of human use so long its beginnings are shrouded in myth, utilized for everything from blankets to clothing. Both materials are the result of extensive human interventions, forcefully taken from the natural world and reengineered for human utility. In the process, their history as living tissue is lost and covered over.

Dorit Cypis redeems plywood and wool through the act of making, turning common utility on its head with an inspired determination to free associate rather than follow the directions. Usually the invisible infrastructure of buildings, plywood is transformed by Cypis into the most visible, valuable, and rare of wood uses: art frames for her tiny video monitors. Instead of processing the lambs' fleece into wool or clothing, Cypis uses it much as a painter or sculptor would, outlining the plywood grain with an overcoating of fleece, spreading and pulling it into new shapes in the wall abstraction, and finally creating a single cubic rectangle of wool in the center of the room.

Once Cypis recasts the materials, they take on new symbolic life, growing into meanings that extend beyond a simple statement of use and reuse. Far from losing its association as building material, the plywood frames echo walls and begin to look like monolithic columns and then rows of mythic trees. Liberated from its woven invisibility, the fleece once again becomes the fur of sheep, an animal whose history includes thousands of years of religious sacrifice in which it was the preferred victim. Almost without warning, the past has interpenetrated the present, the plywood frames coexisting as structural outline and support, the fleece abstraction as vision of the unknowable, the wool rectan

gle as sacrificial altar. Museum room become temple become ritual space, and all for a glimpse of eight miniature videos become transcendent truth, become guidebook to redemption.

But if its one thing that Out of Time makes clear, it's that redemption and transcendence have their price. Billions of slaughtered lambs, untold gallons of blood running down gutters, such is the economy of religion and by association the culture of contemporary museums. When Cypis uses the fur of lambs to outline the dead trees in plywood, we are given a symbolic tally sheet of the huge price the natural world is called upon to pay for museums to frame even the smallest artworks, redeeming them for our benefit from the surrounding symbolic wilderness. Out of Time suggests that art is more than a game of historical reference, that it enacts a price for every surrealistic glimpse of truth, for every minimalist transcendent moment, for every attempt to redeem the political oppression of the body. By remaking the history of the museum as the place of ritual, Cypis renews the basic history of both religion and art. This is a history in which representation is never free, never created without shedding blood and sap, and in our understanding of this logic, we loose both our historical and aesthetic innocence. But it is in that sacrifice that art is redeemed, transcendence embodied, and reality made possible.

DAYDREAM #7

Dorit and I are watching her father juggling oranges. He's dressed like Napoleon, and I understand that he's the best juggler in the world. As he's juggling, the oranges start to slow down and as they slow down his hands move faster. The oranges finally form a perfect circle of equidistant spheres in the air and when they do everything stops. It's a wonderful feeling, complete freedom.

Dorit and I are both amazed and reach for our cameras. But as soon as we do we're in her red Honda driving really fast. Walter Benjamin is in the back seat yelling at the top of his lungs, "Every second of time is the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter." ² He's screaming it over and over again. Dorit is going out of her way to run over stop signs, which make a weird popping sound at contact. I realize we're driving to my old house in Columbus, Ohio, and that the world is moving again. When we get to the house, it's on fire. I'm crying because all my negatives and writings are inside and they're all being destroyed.

Dorit gets out of the car and starts juggling some stones she finds in front of the house. The world stops and I rush into the building. I'm looking everywhere for my pictures and writings and I find boxes of them. But when I look, they're not my old pictures. There's only a few and they're different, amazing, somehow five pictures I wanted to make but never did. Once I see them, I don't want them anymore. When I run outside, Dorit is holding a lamb, smiling. When I look again I realize it's not a lamb, but a beautiful picture of a lamb.

Vince Leo is an artist and writer living in Minneapolis. His writings have been published including Parkett, Artforum, and Artpaper, and his artwork has been exhibited internationally. He is Acting Chair of the Media Arts Division at Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", Illuminations, New York: Schocken Books, 1968

² ibid



still from "Framing Memories I Never Had" 1998





Out of Time 1998, (details)

Walker Art Center,

raw sheep fleece, plywood panels, video camcorder viewfinders, closed circuit video camera, video laser disc and player, video sequencer, audio-video DA's, latex wall paint

