

"Autobiography is always fiction."

– David Bellos

**\_PERCEPTION**

Words are not going to help us. They only cheat us into believing we communicate. I don't even speak your language. I'm using it like a housewife in a morning ceramics class. It doesn't help. All I can possibly do is preparation. I'm not even sure I ever did anything, besides moving some things around. Truth is never found twice in the same place. A revolt is yet another form. There's no greater lie than conviction. I always hated puzzles. Art leaves me speechless. Silence is always awkward. It's also often taken the wrong way. I don't belong here and I have a million ways to prove it. I bet if you asked anyone who knew me as a child they would tell you the same thing. I don't remember ever being a child. The goal is to answer the question without pretending to be something I can't imitate. Useful is a way out of saying harmful. Finding benefits in my obsessions doesn't make them less exhausting. Even a bit too much may result in a spill. I don't really care to be here, but I was trained to try to make the most of it. I used to be preoccupied with saving things. The next thing I want to learn is how to hold my breath.

Hard to express the thrill in escaping. I remember her eyes wide open, raged! I would probably give an arm to assure she doesn't mention this to my parents. I send myself emails all the time, little things I don't want to forget. The only reason I do what I do

is because this is how it's done. I was never a hero. I was always mute in the face of evil. That's all there is to count on. There's nothing I'm more worried about than if anything happens to my computer. Having a kid means having a whole lot more to carry. Nature is not a convention. Form is a convention. I've never admitted that if I had a gun facing another gun I would rather be the one to die. I'm just not so worried about it. It's naïve to think I wouldn't pull the trigger. It must be instinct, but it doesn't make sense. I'm never really sure where I'm going. I consider myself lucky if I know what I'm trying to escape and some of what I sacrifice on my way. He seemed really stupid, as if something was a little bit off. I remember she called on him. He said something about Moses on a cliff, with wings, and flying somewhere. I have no clue what has become of him, if he is alive. I have an automatic response to most of what I'm asked. If I'm asked something else, I'm likely to stutter. I don't know if arrogance makes you blind, or blindness makes you arrogant. How can anyone bear the boredom in knowing everything? I know from experience it's possible to sleep and walk with fifteen pounds on my back. There's nothing essential in what we can prove. I cannot force you to see it. It's not respect, but weakness. It's impossible to take a picture from the inside. Only interest can influence what I see.

Only purpose can affect sensation. Just dare saying the word "occupation" in Israel, and you can be sure to lose your audience. Be careful not to lose an eye in the midst of it. I can't stand the sound of kids expressing their parents' misery. Perhaps sex is the only reason left, unless you've been deprived of ever being able to enjoy it. Just making sure I have no audience left. If you're still reading, think again whether you're really being paid enough. Fear is the only residue. Branding doesn't change truth. There were no other survivors. Work is the only excuse left. Experience doesn't necessarily have anything to do with reality. Nothing could possibly be better than having nothing to say. If there was a choice, we would always take suffering over loneliness. There's freedom in knowing no one hears. It's hard to imagine women could have done worse. He wanted to show me something. He had a heavy rope and a pretty branch. We were walking, until the bully came and grabbed the rope from his hands. He started to beg. The bully let him go for a while, enjoying every moment, eventually offering to trade the rope for the branch. He didn't think twice, and we went away. The one that's truly hard is the victim becoming the victimizer. I don't doubt it, it's just too tragic to bear. I don't enjoy lying. I don't do it for fun, but I would easily do it for a good reason. As a kid I lied all the time to save

my throat. It wasn't a smooth ride. Never confess a lie. You don't get a second chance. No one saw it. Like nothing happened. Short sentences never say much. Long sentences hardly ever say anything. I'm pretty sure I'm repeating myself. There's nothing beyond repetition. It's bad enough to know they're afraid of me. There's no truth before hitting a wall. My goal is to do as little as possible. I remember being told the lie that I could do what I want with my life, but I never realized how it held freedom in the container of doing. Success is a collection of tricks. I could only become what I was told would become of me. There's no escape. If I ever succeed in this world I hope none of my friends hear about it. Television is the worst invention. When even the humblest empathy can be taken for arrogance or motivated by evil, as it probably is, what point does it make to say anything? Death is the only form. I can never finish anything. Nothing can ever be finished. I wish I could let it go, but all I really care about is myself, and none of this is convenient. The one thing I keep impressing myself with is the effort and time I invest in the most irremediable things. The only reason I blame myself is because I'm the only one around. I have no idea how to make it happen again. I can't remember how I did it last time. I'm not even sure what I did. The only thing that matters is pleasing authority.

Practice makes perfect. Whenever two real people meet one of them must die. Only men make a fuss about it. My grandfather had the best stories! About his village in Hungary, and his magic stick and all his adventures. I never saw the horror in his eyes. Explanation is unavoidable death. The only answer lies in what I have missed. It's so hard to complete a thought. The best things start happening only when I can no longer stay. I really didn't want to hurt you, or at least that's what I want to believe. It's the words. There are none left to use.

## \_SPACE

I'm impressed by how well you quote my faltering words. The one that keeps stabbing is "sculptures." What does it even mean? I don't make sculptures. Rodin made sculptures. Michelangelo made some fantastic ones. I'm not doing that at all. I can't really say what I do. The only thing I know I'm doing is looking, and saying this is crap, but I'm not really sure what happens in between every time I say it. It's so hard to start right when I'm finished. All I can do is walk in circles again. The world is round. Everything looks the same. My first teacher picked me up off the street. She must have done it out of some feeling of obligation, but it doesn't matter. She said I needed to learn to listen creatively. I took it as an insult. It's hard to see what I don't hear.

I don't know how I got here. It must have been the only place open. It seems impossible for me to resist sneaking in through an open door, if only I could be

inside without anyone noticing. After these endless days of work, Adam gets all over me, climbing and wallowing, as if he is trying to get back inside me. In a way, it was easier when he was inside me, and I didn't have to deal with having myself between us.

"Mom, what is here?"

"Here is not there."

"Here *is* there!"

"Right."

"Why did you say that here is not there?"

"I was wrong..."

If form is what I can't avoid, trying to deal with you, perhaps the only freedom is in making up new forms. It hardly ever works. Beckett's really good at that! I guess it has to do with how much easier it is to love from a distance. The same with hate. The problem is needing distance in a tiny room. I wonder whether a home for a man is similar to what it is in my mind. Is it? I would guess not. Women can really host. Space. Form. Freedom. Protection. Possession. Borders. You are in me but we are apart. "Language is a placenta." It's the form of our life. It's hard to see through the eyes of a stranger. I think my work in the studio is somehow somewhere else, where Hebrew or English doesn't exist. It's probably my favorite place to be, and yet trying to word it, I cannot avoid referring to it as a place. Trying to make sense is often taken as

[Norman  
Manea,  
"Nomadic  
Language,"  
in Alvin H.  
Rosenfeld,  
ed., *The  
Writer  
Uprooted*.]



mastering, but maybe it doesn't have to be. I can feel the words conquer my mind, making it firm, rigid. Going over my notes in Hebrew, and those in English, I feel two different people. In translation, it's not only the words that I change, but the force that produced them, and the weight. Home. Sounds like you're trying to sell me something. I remember the door to my father's office closing. That meant my mom wanted to tell him something without me hearing. I knew I didn't want to hear it. I was always the first out the door.

Your question tweaked me. The one about my works and *Malone Dies*. I don't blame you, because I appreciate you for the million other things you have told me, and for much more. What I can say is, you may see a window. Probably not a bed, but maybe something more. You also asked if I try to liberate the material. The word liberation makes me worry about other things. Order is one of my biggest challenges. In the studio it's sometimes helpful, not being sure. Something is brought out and examined. It must be some kind of translation. I can sometimes be somewhat satisfied with everything that was left out, or in, or somewhere else, or with everything I didn't say. I remember my mother knowing what I told my friend on the phone, and now my son has no TV, but he talks on video with his grandparents overseas, and he's two and half years old. Malone is in a room, this is described in many details,

but I'm never really sure where he is, or where I am either. I like the idea of having temporary neighbors, who are all breathing a little more freely, stepping a little more lightly on the ground, and everyone can afford being really nice, as we would never again meet in our lives. "Present state. This room seems to be mine. I can find no other explanation to my being left in it. ... It is better to adopt the simplest explanation, even if it is not simple, even if it does not explain very much. ... It is not a room in a hospital, or in a madhouse, I can feel that. I have listened at different hours of the day and night and never heard anything suspicious or unusual, but always the peaceful sounds of men at large, getting up, lying down, preparing food, coming and going, weeping and laughing, or nothing at all, no sounds at all. ... I do not remember how I got here. ... I was walking certainly, all my life I have been walking. ... I have only to open my eyes to have them begin again, the sky and smoke of mankind. My sight and hearing are very bad. ... Dark and silent and stale, I am no prey for them. I am far from the sounds of blood and breath, immured. ... Somewhere in this turmoil thought struggles on, it too wide of the mark. It too seeks me, as it always has, where I am not to be found. It too cannot be quiet." Truth is not a shelter. It often feels more dangerous than the bullets whizzing over my head. Hegel said home is where we

[Samuel  
Beckett,  
*Malone  
Dies.*]

are not afraid. That's a good one. We move all the time. Because we can, and because we have to, and because home is just a form, a set we can put up anywhere: we know it's a home just like we know this is a chair and this is a table. I can't think when I'm outside, I can't see when I'm outside; I'm not even sure what it's good for, besides escaping the frozen sea. The more I study, the more doors open. Apparently it's hard to avoid a concussion every time you run with your eyes closed into a wall. Israeli doctors are refusing to force-feed Palestinian prisoners. What's the difference between inside and outside? I'll just go and never look back. "By putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of 'going places,' of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight." Who cares about art anyway. Arriving in New York seven years ago, suddenly it was quiet: foreigners exist in a different space. Suddenly I'm the person people are kind to but would never have dinner with. I'm an Israeli, and have no chance to be anything before that. A woman. It's a bit like going back in time. I'm like a kid that doesn't know what's going on. Why was everyone just laughing, and what was just announced on the subway, and where is everyone going? After months of training by scientists, the ape was finally able to produce the first drawing ever made by an animal! It

[Franz  
Kafka,  
*Letters to  
Friends,  
Family and  
Editors.*]

[Vladimir  
Nabokov,  
*Lolita.*]

[Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *Lolita*.]

happened to be of its cage. Behaving out of the norm means you're selfish or crazy. Perhaps a home is a place where you can be who you are, and so sometimes being away is where you can finally be at home. It was hard, but also so much easier. I was finally invisible! But the language. At least it's easy not to read. I think this lets me see more. Somewhat more, as there's really very little to see here. There are also possibilities. I make mistakes. I tease and play like a child, no one takes it seriously. What is this space between languages? What gets lost in there? This must be such an interesting place. Thinking in translation I always suffer the need to let go. This could never be the same as that, it has no place here, it's from a different world. We tend to see another language like a part of nature to be cultivated, made like us, as if that meant anything besides extinction. Hopi language is so different, we could hardly imagine their world in our minds. Many of our core words don't exist in Hopi, even though preliterate language is known to be more precise. We learned to simplify in order to master. "Time," "space," "substance" and "matter" replace experience with a form that swallows everything inside itself. "Tomorrow is another day" is not part of Hopi continuity. Hopi doesn't objectify the subjective experience of time, which is "becoming later and later." Everything that happened is part of reality; there's no

studying a historical record as if it were an isolated thing. Our time is motion in space, so it's wasted, while for the Hopi it accumulates. Their desire and thought are the first stages in every action, and so part of it. Our language draws everything, including our mind, into space, objectifying it, separating each part from the whole. We accept that physical energy, a force, produces an effect, but tend to believe that mental energy, our thoughts, are contained within our bodies, producing nothing, existing only in imaginary space in our mind. We consider the real world to be outside, the space that exists without thought.

[Benjamin  
Lee Whorf,  
*Language,  
Thought,  
and  
Reality.*]

Language doesn't only communicate thought, it creates thought. Taking one word out is enough to change everything. Stuck in this sea of junk, I'm just looking for more room for the air, hoping to come across something that's worth seeing. Mastering is an illusion. Truth is never found twice in the same place. Scholem warned of the dangerous potential within the language. Jewish philosophy avoided facing the primitive foundations of the life of men, preferred seeing evil as a challenge to be suppressed, overlooking the fertile soil cultivated for myths. Our perception and experience are filtered through the language habits of our communities, which "predispose certain choices of interpretation." The problem lies in the assumption that our linguistic community reflects

[Noam  
Zadoff,  
*From Berlin  
to Jerusalem  
and Back.*]

[Edward Sapir, quoted in Benjamin Lee Whorf, "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language."]

reality. And thus pigs are not allowed on the Holy Land, and their floor at the zoo is covered by a ramp. My son is growing in a third language altogether: Hebrew-English spiced with Arabic-Spanish slang. War at home. You either win or lose. Surrender means loss. All we speak is violence. It used to be so much easier for me to be identified as Israeli rather than as a Jew. This is not only because in Israel I'm not the "right kind" of Jew, but because of how attached I was to the language, which wasn't quite my "mother tongue." It is the language of liberated Jews, Jews who'd gone home and become Israelis. Today I wonder whether I'm not more pleasant in English. It's also a burden, but there's a good side to a non-literate existence. Obsession with identity is great, but so is the attachment to words that have lost their meaning. The hostility between those forced out of Europe, out of North Africa, out of Russia, and so on, who are not Europeans, not Arabs, not Russians, and so on, but all Israelis, Jews, turned out to be too much for the scam to work. The parents hate their kids for not being more like them, the kids hate their parents for not being more like them, and the one thing we all have in common is that we are all so full of hate, failing our task to suppress the past. To my surprise, after leaving, I met some Jewish people. Never happened in Israel. A home could also be the place where one dies.

**\_PROGRESS  
AND  
REGRESSION**

[Karl Marx,  
"For a  
Ruthless  
Criticism of  
Everything  
Existing."]

I have a recurring dream, in which I'm trying to scream with all my might but no voice comes out. It often wakes me up, to my ability to use my muscles again. Only yesterday's news. There's no room. No air. No time. No sense. No coherence. Nothing can exist in complete independence. One thing that yanks me out of my coma is hearing Israelis on vacation saying, "We don't really feel that in Israel, it only looks like that on the news, it's not really like that, you know, it's a Western country, we go shopping, we go to the beach, we have the best food in the world, really!" That's how it's hopeless: we don't really feel. The Bible tells the story of the tree that provided the knowledge of good and evil, followed by the act of covering of the body. One example that seems at the moment a little closer to the surface is the abuse of women. We look around and we don't see it. Everyone seems fine. Except those updates about ISIS. But we don't see any of it around here. We've heard of women who were raped, but we don't see them, because they've gotten over it. It's almost a consensus by now that reason is in control of experience. The unbearable truth is that we cannot bring back to life what we've killed. We can only mourn. Its absence must be acknowledged for the possibility of anything true to grow. Hard to let it go. It's so tempting to replace reality with a blissful illusion, untouched by traces of sadness. It's a lie, and asking for it is a refusal



to see. It's not painting that's dead. It's us. And it's hard to admit that something dear is gone forever. It happened. There's no power that's going to help us deal with this one, we can never make sense of it, we cannot accept this monster that we have become, so all we keep doing is isolating it as an other that has nothing to do with us, and that's our final chord. We keep wandering, barely a vague memory of life, until death redeems us. I only use the word "art" when there's no way to avoid it. Words hardly mean anything at this point. Like "book." I happen to like it, it has a nice sound in the ear of a foreigner, but what is a book to us? Merely another object. "Do you know what's my favorite book of all time?" asked Donald Trump after talking about his *The Art of The Deal*, which he had described as his second favorite, second only to one: "The Bible! Nothing beats the Bible." I hate perplexing the achievement of winning with the sight of dead bodies. Truth is never found twice in the same place. It's passing beyond the grasp. The specific inherently lacks aspiration to totality. Exclusiveness detached from time means unchangeable domination. Trying to own it is killing it. What is living cannot be possessed. Art knows its own death. It's the mourning, past death, of life that was missed. Most of us don't see. We're not used to seeing living. We do not even see the death we are causing ourselves. I already take it for granted that

[Theodor Adorno, "Morality and Temporal Sequence," *Minima Moralia*.]

the doors open, but now machines are also talking to me. We pass by registers and find ourselves caught in the trap: "Please select your language." Adam's thrilled and doesn't want to leave and now there's a line. "Wait, let's let those people go first."

"Why?"

"Because they need to pay."

"Why?"

"Because they got something."

"I want to get something!"

The concept of homeland came from the order of property, the basis of alienation. Money took over the meanings that once belonged to food, shelter, dignity and freedom. Only a crazy or a parasite would not put it as a first priority. Reality is hard to bear. "She could not believe that things could be the same in different places, and since her life so far had been bad, the remainder of it would surely be better." The only way out of deprivation is through gaining power by victimizing another, and the pain is so great that we can't afford seeing it. All that is left for art is to make a promise in order to break it. We must see what is new to be able to see the past. I search the web and there's hardly a date to anything. Everything is now, and the authority is violence. Biting the feeding hand a little too hard results in the death of the tortured dog. It is not destruction, but only the perfection of

[Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.]

[Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Lowell Bair.]

the division of labor that can reduce suffering. "What is art?" is a question of commodity production. Two foreigners become friends. She was smart, peculiar, and suffering. It's hard to be alone. She'd had to leave her dog back home, and those were the softest words I ever heard coming out of her. She told me about this art conference she helped organize. An artist, as part of her performance, killed a lobster, ate it, and shared it with the audience, while saying that as far as she could know, the lobster didn't feel any pain. Or something along those lines. All this brilliant crazy German woman could do was leave the place, while no one else seemed to have a problem with it, not one out of over one hundred art-world professionals and academics. "The most incomprehensible thing about this world is that it's comprehensible." If you can't explain it you should probably leave. What is one lobster for the sake of the world? She got over it. She had to keep her job. Art is marked by the trace of what is missing or it supports the maintenance of silencing history. How can we assure something other than self-assertion? Thinking of what we've done to the planet, I am tortured with adding to the pile, giving a hand to this system of exploitation in the service of veiling truth. Making more of the same is no less than a crime. What's "beyond resemblance"? We normally don't take more than two seconds to kill. How can I make it a little harder? How

[Adorno, "Moral-philosophie," quoted in Robert Hullot-Kentor, "Back to Adorno," *Things Beyond Resemblance*.]

[Albert Einstein, quoted in Antonina Vallentin, *Einstein: A Biography*.]

[Wallace Stevens, "Prologues to What Is Possible."]

[Hullot-Kentor, "Second Salvage," *Things Beyond Resemblance.*]

can I make you hesitate, raise a doubt? It's in this hesitation that you might see through the veil of fear. Art knows us better than we know ourselves, revealing something for us to recognize, something we were blind to beforehand. Something we can't avoid knowing. A perplexity that shakes our illusion of control. We find it intolerable to contemplate something that's beyond an immediate trigger for action. It's a seed dropped out of a pocket. It "waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into

[Adorno, "Gaps," *Minima Moralia.*]

teaching." There's nowhere for us to go. We are going nowhere. We must get to the beginning. It's trivial if we think about it in terms of space: when we get stuck, the only way out is backward. There's no other way to get it right. And yet we are blind to this essential truth when it comes to us, as if we were above it. Despair.

[Adorno, "Memento," *Minima Moralia.*]

Working so hard, wasting time, and the feeling of being cheated, of being wrong, of having nothing. And yet I'd never admit to being lost. How can I tolerate the truth? "For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live." Another real one is out. Professor Landau is fascinating. Prison is not all bad. He went at least twice. Arrested for refusing. A Jewish-Israeli professor in Ben-Gurion University, Landau put his research in a bag, got into his car, and drove to jail, asking to be arrested. Many find their way out. It's easy. You're in school, then sick, then

your favorite grandma just died, and they give up. It's really not that hard, especially because they have more than enough. Many want to go! It's vacation, sort of. You're off work while still being paid, finally a break from the woman and the kids, some quality time with the guys, laughing together all night. Sometimes there's even some action, but statistics show you have a better chance of dying in a car accident on your way to work. The army is sacred in Israel. No one should touch it! Everyone goes! It's not about politics. You vote for politics - the majority wins - while the army just follow orders. That's democracy. Maybe that could be a way to close things for now. I always prefer if more capable people do the job for me. The hasty translation from Hebrew is mine: "I'm getting on a plane to Philadelphia. ... For real. Don't freak out, I've already freaked out for you. But don't be cool, what is there to be cool about in here? To be cool one goes on vacation, abroad, everyone knows that. Here is for stress, for running around, fast and shallow breathing, creaking lungs. I'll try to relax. I don't promise anything. I had failed it in the past. ... I don't plan anything. Maybe I'll keep writing regularly, maybe I won't write at all, maybe I'll publish vegan-pie recipes. ... Maybe I'll take pictures of benches in the park. I love the benches in the park. Only when they are made out of wood, and only when the paint is peeling off. For a while now I've

been trying to ... say only what has to be said. ... Fewer and fewer topics. ... Evil and stupidity keep trying to renew themselves, trying to keep it fresh, but to be honest, they're pretty much repeating themselves. That's their secret trick. That's how they wear you down; not by cruelty, not by hopelessness, but by boredom. I don't want to give up and don't want to get bored. It's a problem. Solution: I need air. Space. A different horizon. ... We've been together for seven years, haven't we? It's only going to do us good, believe me. We'll be back, like new."

[Idan  
Landau,  
"To Get Out  
of this Well,  
to Terrify  
Passersby,"  
[http://  
idanlandau.  
com](http://idanlandau.com)]

# Present Absence

Maya Cohen Levy

I recall a conversation Noa Leshem-Gradus told me about, between herself and her three-year-old son, Adam:

“Mom, what is here?”

“Here is not there.”

“Here *is* there!”

“Right.”

“Why did you say that here is not there?”

“I was wrong...”

“Here *is* there!” This assertion has stayed with me. There is magic in such a statement, which undermines order and form and generates endless movement. A veritable koan from the mouth of a child aged

three. This conversation resonates with my thoughts about Noa Leshem-Gradus's exhibition "In the Smokeless Air" at the Janco-Dada Museum, in which a looped movement through space weaves together the here and there.

This site-specific installation, whose title is a quotation from Wordsworth, was produced especially for the Janco-Dada Museum space. Our entry into the space is supported by the grid, which is the key motif in the exhibition. At first sight, the space seems organized. We are at a safe place, there's here and there's there. We are in the familiar sphere of perspective, the point of view is clear. The gallery ceiling is comprised of an exposed net of concrete beams, an architectural element in the Brutalist style common in Israel, particularly in public buildings built in the 1950s. This net is visually conspicuous in the gallery, which bears the historical memory of present absence. The ceiling grid reflects on the entire show. It underlies the entire installation. In this context, one cannot refrain from referring to Sol LeWitt and the deep sense of ethical commitment in his work, stemming from the modernist promise of the grid's inherent possibilities.

From this seemingly promising net Leshem-Gradus weaves the entire exhibition, using it as a web with which to ensnare the viewer. The functional beams stretching across the length and width of the ceiling serve the artist as partial orientation coordinates. Aluminum strips descend from the ceiling to the walls and then to the floor, like a three-dimensional drawing which is an extension of the grid, and then extend through the entire space. This drawing in space represents the columns that are nonexistent thanks to the ceiling beams, while filling the space with mass-less columns. The aluminum-strip grid drawing voids the mass of the ceiling grid while dividing the space into subareas. And so the grid, which had instilled



confidence upon entering the space, changes as we move forward. Once one has entered the world created by Leshem-Gradus the boundaries become indistinct and mental movement ensues between different orders – physical experience, perception, political thought, and psychological affects – which become intermingled. The three-dimensional drawing indicates the traces of the absent mass while filling spaces. At the same time, it imprisons the viewer in the maze which is at its very core.

The video installation *What Where* is a video of a performance of Samuel Beckett's last minimalist play. The stage was built according to the playwright's directions, with three exits. The characters are seen on nine monitors, each cut into three close-up images – of the head, hips, and feet – and only visible when standing at a particular point. The characters' movement is sketched by their on-screen appearance and disappearance. A voice issues from a megaphone, stating "We are the last five" – and each character in turn disappears for questioning. Their disappearance implies the existence of an invisible space, a "back room," an interrogation room. The play presents a cyclical interrogator-and-interrogated matrix propelled by suspicion and fear, with no way of stopping or changing direction. The characters are confined by the pattern of distrust, which turns the wheels of history.

Opposite the video installation *What Where* the artist opens, in a black-painted wall, a virtual window whose frame has made its way from the streets of New York to Ein Hod, Israel. Through this window we watch a convoy of refugees walking and walking and getting nowhere. This is a segment from a home movie filmed at the beginning of the 1948 War of Arab people leaving their homes. A minor fragment of this film has turned in Leshem-Gradus's *In the*

*Smokeless Air* into a central image. The refugees move ceaselessly, they never stop walking. Here, the refugees, the exiled, those fleeing for their lives, these transparent people, tell the denied aspect of history, presenting the play's "back room" or functioning as its Greek chorus.

Invisible presence keeps accumulating in the exhibition. Two guards are present in the museum space. Attention is drawn to them, they are lit by a spot light, but they are absent, transparent, mere shadows. These are two video projections of the shadows of a standing guard and a sitting one. The figures are almost still, their movement practically imperceptible. It is a looped screening of the guards' eight-hour working day. Their shadows are visible from every spot around the space, one cannot help but see them, yet they are not there.

In the sound work *Audio Guide*, a Perspex cube is set on an elegant pedestal. Serious, pleasant female voices describe unidentified art works. The descriptions go on and on, and the void generated by the veiling descriptive and interpretive words turns oppressive. This verbal masking obscures the artistic object and renders it inaccessible, intensifying the gap between speaking about something and the thing itself.

Another work which takes part in the reorganization of the space or its deconstruction is *See Right Through*. A wall, which is part of the museum's structure, divides the gallery in two. At its center, on either side, Leshem-Gradus has set cameras, and on each side of the wall is screened the space behind it, which is blocked to the view. The screened image "cancels" the wall and produces the impression of a single, uninterrupted space. On each side of the wall one stands in a space which is half real, half virtual. The chimerical sense of

illusion grows stronger once one realizes that the temporal aspect of the work is non-narrative. While the image screened on one side of the wall is captured in real time, on the other side it is a video which was filmed in the gallery in advance, which only creates the illusion of real time. It is only upon moving from one part of the gallery to the other that the installation's seemingly ingenuous appearance is undermined. One's orientation in the actual space diminishes and the sense of time is disrupted; we are thrown into elastic, shifting time and space.

Noa Leshem-Gradus offers the viewers a layered, fluctuating experience of orientation in a space that is both actual and conceptual. The perspective splits, doubles, collapses and is reassembled. It runs the gamut between memory of the past and the present, between deceptive, imaginary space and reflected space, and between states of stability or familiar reality and a sense of *déjà vu* or disorientation among visual illusions and the labyrinths of the mind, often resulting in defamiliarization.

In Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, as Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot a boy arrives, every day, bearing a message from Godot that he will come the next day, "without fail." But he does not come. The refugees march and remain in the same place. Interrogator and interrogated figures cyclically exchange roles, the guards are not there, time does not move forward. Leshem-Gradus's installation, which at first seems to promise order, plays tricks on us over and over again, denying us a stable perspective even for a moment – and the promise of order remains unfulfilled. The interplay between the various elements builds up a sense of a labyrinthine loop. All the while, absence and denial are alarmingly intensified, defining both the labyrinth and us.