

Outlined Absence

The Shabbat Room

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History and what transcends it – God, emptiness and memory – confer an all-embracing extra-territoriality to the work of Maya Zack. It is as though we slip into margins strewn with traces the archaeology of which is fully revealed by the artist, to the point of imparting a name, and a voice, to each one of them. These margins could be the reverse of reality: beyond-time where what existed obstinately readjusts, unites and testifies. Objects, remains of dreams, pains, books and foods – Maya Zack's videos, drawings and installations appear like mystical operations that seek to crack the order of temporality.

In the series of drawings entitled *Apparent Death* (2013), departed people describe the hour of their death; absence is outlined in the video *Mother Economy* (2007), and in the wake of *Living Room* (computer-generated visualization installation, 2010) which reconstructs a Berlin apartment whose Jewish residents were expelled in 1938 and is based on the recorded memories of the only survivor, now living in Israel, *The Shabbat Room* (installation, 2013) unfolds across a succession of architectonic collisions to reveal what Paul Celan, whose poetry is a source of living inspiration in Maya Zack's work, called "the crevice of time."

If one adheres to a historical time period, to chronology as opposed to the times of souls – to the *imaginal world* – then one should say that the original Shabbat room was conceived in 1899, under the title *Gute Stube*, by Austrian artist Isidor Kaufmann (1853-1921), whose work was part of the spiritual renewal which, from Prague to Paris, passing by Vienna and Berlin, marked the birth of the last century. It is also probable that Kaufmann's hassidic-themed works played a role, at least intermittently, in the search for the post-political New Thought (*Das Neue Denken*) that would lead Joseph Roth, Kafka, Buber and many others towards Hassidism's "mystical in the mundane."

Already in 1899, Kaufmann's work spoke of the "world of yesterday": the universe of the shtetl, with its hassidic courts and houses of study, of which only an ossified society remained, awaiting the Catastrophe; a society Hitler took pains to destroy and, with it, the idea that man can inhabit the world through the sheer force of language, writing and prayer.

Right-away, Kaufmann's *Gute Stube* took on the aspect of a wandering work: it was presented for the first time in 1899 at the Jewish Museum of Vienna, which had been inaugurated four years earlier. From 1902 till 1911, this museum and its collections moved three times before settling at No. 16 Malzgasse, in the center of the city. In the meantime, Kaufmann's work was exhibited in several European cities then, in 1938, the Gestapo decreed the closure of the museum. In the eyes of the Nazis, it was important for the Jews to be viewed as a *scientific* problem in order to prepare the way for the subsequent phase, the *industrialization* of their murder. The collections of the Jewish Museum of Vienna, which included Kaufmann's *Gute Stube*, were thus handed over to the Natural History Museum of Vienna, where they were intended to demonstrate the "Hebrew peril" to the "Aryan" public. 1938 was also the year of the publication of *Der Giftpilz* (The Poisonous Mushroom) – the best-seller of the *Der Stürmer* publishing firm headed by Julius Streicher himself, which aimed to teach the children of the Reich that "just as a

poisonous mushroom is capable of killing an entire family, a lone Jew can destroy a whole village, a city and even an entire people.”

In the early 1940s, Vienna's Museum of Ethnology claimed – and obtained – these works which formed the basis of several anti-Semitic exhibitions. After the war, it was not until the early 1960s that various pieces from these collections began to surface, and only in 1992 that they were given a home by the new Jewish Museum of Vienna that was established a few years earlier. Of Kaufmann's *Gute Stube*, only a six branched candelabra, a few ritual utensils and a glass survived, and these have been on display since 1996. In a certain way, Maya Zack's *The Shabbat Room* leads us to a meditation on the parallels between the *subject* of the work (the Shabbat room as a symbol of the being-in-the-world of the Diasporas of Eastern Europe) and the terrestrial *destiny* of the work itself (dismantled, expelled, dispersed – revived): Kaufmann's studio entwines itself into his model, then takes us back to the Jewish Museum of Vienna that was shut down by the Nazis in 1938, to form one narratological continuum over which Zack projects a meta-commentary, her exegesis of Kaufmann's exegesis and, as often in the work of the Israeli artist, it is History that we see approaching, first masked then unveiled and finally delivered to the present in all its nakedness.

Thus, *The Shabbat Room* is the room where History takes shape, stalls and revives. A sort of palimpsest waiting for a new writing which, in spite of everything, will preserve its memory of prior incarnations and the tremors of ancient alphabets.

Kabbala uses the concept of concatenation (השתלשלות) to designate this advent of a line of transmission, based on a priori disparate factors, where each link preserves its otherness, its own language while forming all together an open Book.

This kabbalistic source is fully revealed in the fourth frame of Maya Zack's work, entitled *The Mystical Shabbat*. For the History decrypted in the three preceding frames, History exposed, denounced, paradoxically leads to that which begets it.

Beginning, end, return. Maya Zack borrows from the mystics an intuition of a cyclical process where beginning and end meet – this is the profound meaning of Shabbat, which breaks the tyranny of a linear totality, to open onto an inter-world, where shadow and light wed under a different law.

L.C. [Tel Aviv, January 2014]
[English translation by Helga Abraham]

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Prints from

The Shabbat Room - a permanent installation in the Jewish Museum Vienna

The project was commissioned and developed for the core exhibition of the Museum in 2013

Room installation: four Lambda prints (based on computer-generated visualization)

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3D visualization: Omer Breiner