

art & activism

ACTIVATING EXODUS:

THE ART OF MELISSA SHIFF

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Immediately, the viewer confronts a screen embedded in a crushed velvet pillow surrounded by a wall of matzah, showing a montage of video clips imaging the ten ancient plagues that Yahweh cast on the land of Egypt: blood, frogs, vermin, beasts, cattle disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the slaying of firstborn sons. An accompanying voice-over rhythmically recites the plagues in Hebrew and in English, not simply the ancient plagues but also possible analogies to our present-day plagues of homophobia, unbridled profit motive, hatred toward the Other, AIDS, rape of nature, war, one-dimensional rhetoric, religious fundamentalism, and exploitation of the Other.

Upon entering the dimly lit scene of "The Medium is the Matzo," Canadian artist Melissa Shiff's 2005 Passover installation at the Bronfman Center at New York University, one first moves through a narrow corridor of walls tiled with matzo and a floor lined with small detailed pillows reading "crush oppression" overlaid upon the image of matzo. The viewer walks over these floors, literally crushing the matzo beneath their feet along the way. In total, the gallery is covered with approximately 4,000 pieces of matzo donated by Manischewitz. Haunted and hallowed, there is a sense that one has entered a consecrated space and time, a moment loaded with meaning. This passageway opens up into a room with a video installation that projects onto a large screen the scene of the Israelites departing Egypt through the pathway in the Red Sea, orchestrated by Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's iconic film *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Here, the viewer sees themselves inserted into the scene,

Detail of *Ten Plagues Video Pillow* (2005) by Melissa Shiff

a participant in the Exodus. The passage from the ritual text in the Haggadah that states "You yourself feel as if you are leaving Egypt" is evoked; the emphasis is on the here and now.

This visual invocation of Judeo-kitsch, Biblical weightiness, and the media theory of Marshall McLuhan is only the beginning of Shiff's project to critically reconsider the medium and the message of ritual, popular culture, social activism, and contemporary art. Media, according to Shiff, a video, installation, and performance artist, is the place where social action begins. Shiff's invocation of the movement through *Mitzrayim*, the Hebrew word for the land of Egypt and "narrow spaces," as it relates to the parting of the Red Sea (in itself, a movement through narrow spaces) is at once symbolic and literal in terms of physical and philosophical oppression. The video loop proposes that this reenactment is and must be continuous. These narrow spaces can be read not simply as the physical or geographic relation of place and situation, but moreover as a way of thinking that must be overcome. Moving through the corridor of the installation, there is a poignant suggestion that "tunnel vision" be deposed.

Working on both levels, this installation recounts the story of Exodus and recalls the Haggadah's mandate to put one's self in the position of the oppressed, to escape narrow mindedness, and to crush oppression. This remembering is not done in the form of passive contemplation, but rather in active participation. The visitor becomes an Israelite escaping Egypt and the pharaohs—moving between these overwhelming walls

of water from slavery to liberation, as Moses parts the Red Sea. This story becomes metaphorical rather than fundamentalist; it serves as a call to action, a call to abolish the plagues through social action. Within our contemporary context, today's pharaohs can be read as the individuals and institutions that oppress people and the environment in the interest of globalization and personal gain.

"The space of liberation" consists of two installations, "Elijah Lounge" and "Miriam Bar," both designed in a style that is hip, sleek, and functional. "Miriam Bar" symbolizes sustenance and spiritual renewal, recalling Miriam who divined water during the passage of the Exodus. Here water is offered to the viewer, enacting a contemporary ritual that has been introduced by feminists to the Passover Seder. The floor of "Elijah Lounge" is further covered with the "crush oppression" matzo pillows, providing an inviting place to recline (the symbolic gesture of freedom at the Seder) and view the video installed within the fireplace façade that shows an extending sequence of doors being opened. This spliced series of entrances represents doors from across New York City, from the Lower East Side to the Upper West Side, scanning the wide ar-

ray of neighborhoods in between and documenting the diversity of economic discrepancies across the city alongside a suggestive proposal for openness and sharing—a further call to end oppression. It is also the same video that is installed in Shiff's *Elijah Chair* (2002) and housed by the permanent collection of the Jewish Museum in New York City. By referring to the Biblical prophet Elijah and the Seder's ritual tradition of opening the door to him in the welcoming gesture of Passover, an invitation is made not only to a community of intimates but also to strangers. By emphasizing this gesture of hospitality, opening the door to the Other, Shiff highlights her advocacy that we ourselves should be placed in the position of the harbingers Elijah. Shiff states:

This video documents the staggering divide of wealth in this city of extremes in an effort to show that Elijah signifies the hospitality and openness to the Other that must occur... If Elijah represents hospitality, I wanted to push his role even further and employ this prophetic figure in the service of social action.¹

This story opens the door—actually and allegorically—to Shiff's practice, a narrative that deliberately evades closure in the name of possibility and reinvention.

Attached to these spaces of reflection and replenishment is the adjacent "Matzo Ball Activist Store" in which one may catch a glimpse of the artist herself at work, stitching her "crush oppression" pillows. This Marxist exposure of the working process is yet another move to actively defeat exploitation by simultaneously demystifying expectations of art and ritual in the name of activism. Along the walls of the "Matzo Ball Activist Store" is row upon row of at least 120 jars of Manischewitz Matzo Ball Soup, which are visually reminiscent of Andy Warhol's silk-screened soup cans. However, Shiff's engagement with consumerism and pop culture is for distinctly different ends; it is part and parcel of an action to aid and address poverty. Significantly, these were donated to a soup kitchen run by the Hebrew Union College upon the exhibit's closing. As a means of literally removing oppression, visitors are also in-

vited to purchase "crush oppression" pillows accompanied by information on the tradition of Passover activism. Described by Shiff as "Seder Enhancement Kits," a portion of her sales goes to help the hungry—just one more way of literally and figuratively thinking outside of the box.

This was not the first display of Shiff's commitment to "transforming the Seder from a story that is told to a story that is acted upon."² Shiff's "Times Square Seder, Featuring the Matzah Ball Soup Kitchen" of 2002 was an interactive performance and installation art piece that mobilized art and ritual in the service of social activism. It was a radical Jewish response to hunger that emphasized the powerful political potential of unleavened bread as it recalled the Jewish people's slavery in Egypt, and remembered their oppression in order to avoid imposing it on others.

Staged in New York City, in the windows of the Chashama Arts Organization, this event accentuated the commitment to social justice demanded by Judaism of caring for strangers among us. Based on the ideal of *tikkun olam*, a recurring motif and resource in Shiff's work, this work sought "to heal, repair, and transform the world," taking the Passover Haggadah's mandate to "feed the hungry" to a place where New York City's hungry and homeless had most visibly been banished.³ Noting the dramatic and disturbing contrast between the sensational advertising and consumerism of this famed capitalist center against the mass crowds of disenfranchised and impoverished peoples, passersby were invited to partake in the event, as not simply viewers but as participants. This "Happening for Homelessness" was situated deliberately in this site of high pedestrian traffic in order to be exposed. As such, this strategic gesture opened up the Seder to the possibilities inherent in those transient and fugitive moments of urban life; it allowed for each person passing by to recognize the nomadic and often disconnected nature of contemporary life while considering themselves within the subject position of the wandering Jew.

Building on a legacy of socially conscious artists, Shiff notes the influence of practitioners such as Martha Rosler who have continuously been committed to

the plight of homelessness and the politically oppressed. Rosler's massive 1989 Times Square billboard display, "Housing Is a Human Right," is, for example, a striking precedent. Notably, Shiff is also continuing an important tradition of Passover activism that dates back to the late 1960s, particularly envisioning Rabbi Arthur Waskow's famous civil rights Freedom Seders as a precedent. The first Freedom Seder occurred significantly on April 4, 1969, the one-year anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., King echoing Moses and the uprising echoing the plagues. It was a ritualized acknowledgement of the shared suffering of blacks and Jews that maximized the ways in which the twin themes of the festival of "Pesach," slavery and freedom, resonate with the historical experience of many peoples. In 1970 at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, the Passover connection between sustenance and shelter was even more explicit, as this Freedom Seder became a refuge for Dan Berrigan, the radical Catholic priest who was an advocate of non-violent strategies of activism and a leader of the draft-resistance movement.⁴ Thus, the Freedom Seder commemorates the experience of all peoples who have been enslaved or exiled, while praying for the unity and liberation of all peoples; consequently, it acts as a meaningful way to bring diverse communities together to share our humanity.

Shiff's "Times Square Seder" event, which continued the tradition of the Freedom Seder's fusion of ideology and action, utilized two storefront window spaces and one interior space that was transformed into "The Matzah Ball Soup Kitchen." The performance moved sequentially through these spaces, eventually arriving in the soup kitchen where spontaneous singing and dancing erupted after soup had been served to the hungry.

Beginning in the first window, a traditional Nigun humming tune was sung, preceded by "refashioned" Passover interrogations, such as, "Why is there a need to feed hungry people in the windows of Chashama this evening?" The ten ancient plagues were then recited by the attending cantor before an invitation was made to the passersby to interject their own naming of contemporary plagues they desired to see eradicated.



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Following this, a group of distinguished guests took their seats in front of a wall covered with matzah, the "poor man's bread." Symbolically removing three pieces of matzah from the back wall, Rabbi Waskow proceeded to explicitly link the breaking of matzah to the problem of homelessness, stating:

If anybody tries to hold onto the abundance in the world, the matzah remains the bread of affliction, the bread of oppression, the bread of poverty and despair. The only way in which the matzah can become the bread of freedom is if we share it and in order to share it we have to break it. So that applies to the wealth we have to share. That applies to food that we have to share and so, we set aside one of the pieces of the broken matzah as a symbol that we will be sharing it.⁵

As in these words, the problems of sustenance and shelter are linked and highlighted throughout Shiff's oeuvre. As they are essential to life, they are often wielded as tools of oppression that bond the one to the other, making Waskow's insights and Shiff's greater project all the more poignant.

The guests then proceeded to tear down the wall, symbolically removing oppression with every detached piece of matzah. Beneath the dismantled wall was revealed the following affecting text from the contemporary philosopher Gideon Ofrat's book, *The Jewish Derrida* (2001), symbolizing the sharing to which Shiff is committed:

Elijah represents unconditional "total hospitality," the expectation and willingness to extend hospitality at all times, awaiting the arrival of the unknown Other without any prior assignation of the time of the meeting; keeping the Elijah chair forever vacant as an ever-open "here-and-now," in the expectation of the event of the Messiah.⁶

Following this unveiling and proclamation to embrace difference, Shiff's *Elijah Chair* was brought in. This rocking chair contains an inset flat screen video in its back, facing outward toward the audience and showing the video that was also projected in the "Elijah Lounge." Signifying hospitality and openness to the Other, the inclusion of this piece again re-

inforced the proposed dismantling of capitalist individualism (by being displayed in one of the storefront windows)—turning the ruthless logic of capitalism against itself. The third space housed the interactive video projection also showcased in "The Medium is the Matzo." Passersby playfully inserted themselves into the scene of the parting of the Red Sea, affectively enacting the commandment, or mitzvah, that is not exclusive to Judaism, but rather implicates all in the political and ethical imperative to empathize with the position of the oppressed.

These connections raise questions of threats to freedom, not simply in relation to the institution of the museum, or any institution for that matter, but additionally in relation to the idea of memory. One of the many arguments in recent years regarding much art concerned with Judaism is that its heavy focus on memory politics may be to the detriment of a living culture. Shiff is able to balance both concerns, with her constant return to memories of oppression in the past (either the floods of nature or of systemic violence), tempered, like a storm, with the invocation of their relevance to our present. Shiff's powerful installation suggests that forty days and forty nights confined to an ark is nothing by contrast to the consequences of not escaping the "narrow spaces" of Mitzrayim, and that there is no way to realize this escape apart from an attachment to memory.

Perhaps the more profound question is, how can art reflect on events of such unimaginable dimension as Auschwitz? Thus, the theorist Theodor Adorno's famous 1949 injunction, "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," is recalled and challenged. Though these were not Adorno's final thoughts on either the Shoah or art and culture, they remain the memorable and highly provocative dictum that challenges the possibility of art ever being the same post-World War II. Shiff's art demands a similar indictment as it proposes that art is an essential practice within the cultural and political context of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; but veritably, art cannot remain the "same," particularly if that sameness suggests numbness, aestheticism, and repetition. Rather, art must be continuously reinvented, not for the sake of innovation and pleasure, but in the name of contemporary relevance and social justice. What

is barbaric after Auschwitz is to reach back for traditional forms and traditional practices unreflectively, as if nothing had happened.⁷ Recognizing that art after the Shoah must be a vigilant deconstruction of systems of oppression and must offer an alternative, self-conscious mode of interaction with the world, Shiff's art continuously presses and dismantles the boundaries of traditional representation and habitual thinking.

"Kicking the Habit: Making Rituals for Happening People" (2005) was the title of an insightful paper presented by Shiff at the "ReJewvenation: The Future of Jewish Culture" conference hosted by the University of Toronto, Canada, in October 2005. In her discussion of her practice as a performance and installation media artist, she drew links to the tradition of "Happenings" set forth by Allan Kaprow. Tapping into the energy of Kaprow's 1966 statement that "At present any avant-garde art is primarily a philosophical quest,"⁸ Shiff demonstrated how she has continued this inquiry with works ranging from the installation "Gender Cuts/The Jew Under the Knife" (2005), which explored the contentious issues of circumcision, systemic misogyny, and sanctioned violence, to "Post-modern Jewish Wedding" (2004). This was a dramatic example of the merging of art and life in which she, along with her partner Louis Kaplan, transformed their entire *khasene* (wedding) using a postmodern scope of strategies, such as turning the *chuppah* (traditional Jewish wedding canopy) into a cinematic screen to exhibit their *Mazel Tov Montage* and showcase Shiff's rewriting of a misogynist passage from Deuteronomy. As an active feminist, Shiff took the liberty of unveiling herself before walking up the aisle. This act of subversion was made even more overt by the Hebrew text from the Book of Genesis that was projected on her body, reading, "She took the veil and covered herself." Similarly, Kaplan selected a text to virtually embody. The text, "The book is my home. It has always been the home of my words. Being Jewish means therefore being at the heart of an essential interrogation," was reflected across him as the words, by extension, reflected on his position as a self-questioning Jew.⁹

Such examples illustrate Shiff's commitment to commemorating, challenging, and overcoming the cleavages and intersections between art, ritual, and activism

through video, performance, and installation. She has the *chutzpah* to reinvent Jewish rituals and analyze Jewish culture by making links to contemporary social problems with the aim of bringing social justice back to Judaism; this underscores questions of what it means to be an activist artist in the present and how this has changed over the last forty years, from Kaprow's condition of ephemerality to Shiff's proposal that "tradition" and memory are

intrinsic to "Happenings" and certainly to activism. Admittedly, she asserts: "My sensibility as a performance artist is in line with the postmodern notion that identity is performed and constructed rather than something that is given, natural or essential."¹⁰ Counter to foundational modernist thinking, Shiff's work argues that performance is essential to art.

Shiff is an artist who is decidedly activist, in all senses of the word. Assuming that activism also implies questions of "access" and "affect," Shiff looks for the transformative possibilities of religion and culture by using a keen sense of philosophical subtlety and opening up spaces for emergent discourse through interrogation and constant critique. Ultimately, art and faith must be regarded as issues of contingency and exchange in order to stay vibrant, relevant, and powerful.

At the intersection of art and activism, or within the site of contemporary art where activism is intrinsic, Shiff's works occupy an avant-garde position of critique and propose the provocative collapse between art and life, theory and practice.

In her own words, she belongs to the *shul* of artists, and as a video, installation, and performance artist, she seeks "to reinvigorate and rejuvenate Jewish rituals" to make them more meaningful acts of participation in the realities of contemporary life.¹¹

Rather than viewing religious ritual as confining, Shiff uses it and her Jewish heritage as sources of renewal and liberation, affectively working against any singular and static notion surrounding the "rite" way of doing things. Shiff intelligently and eloquently challenges the status quo of regimented boundaries between and within art and religion, art and politics, and the self and other. Any and all segregations are challenged, much like the walls of the Red Sea, becoming at once distinct, yet fluid. Shiff reminds us that *kvetching* is not enough—social action is the necessary means to Exodus. 

As the keynote **see**
contemporary artist for the Jewish Museum in Prague's "100 Years of the Jewish Museum exhibition," which runs September 6, 2006 to January 15, 2007, Melissa Shiff will create "ARK," a video sculpture that will bring to life the contrast of its positioning on the street between a cemetery and an important Holocaust memorial. For more information see www.melissashiff.com.

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NOTES

1. The Jewish Museum, "Video Installation by Artist Melissa Shiff," press release, January 8, 2004, www.thejewishmuseum.org/site/pages/press.php?id=32.
2. Melissa Shiff, "Seder Enhancement Kits" (2002).
3. Melissa Shiff, "Times Square Seder: Happening for Homelessness," *Tikkun* (March-April 2004), 62.
4. Arthur Waskow, The Bush is Burning!: Radical Judaism Faces the Pharaohs of the Modern Superstate (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 24-25.
5. Arthur Waskow, speech, "Times Square Seder," New York, 2002.
6. Gideon Ofrat, The Jewish Derrida (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001).
7. Gene Ray, Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11 (Studies in European Culture and History) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 64.
8. Allan Kaprow, Assemblage, Environments & Happenings (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966), 207.
9. Melissa Shiff and Louis Kaplan, "Body Projections," in "Reframing Ritual: Postmodern Jewish Wedding" (Prague, Czech Republic: Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006), 16.
10. Melissa Shiff, "Why Postmodern Jewish Wedding?" in "Reframing Ritual: Postmodern Jewish Wedding" (Prague, Czech Republic: Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006), 8.
11. Ibid.