

For one moment, at the start, in the treetop, the branches sway unnaturally but silently; the sound has not yet reached them; but the rays of the setting sun glimmer through the branches, dazzling the eyes. But no sound yet.

For one moment, an unfamiliar machine approaches the tree trunk and holds it in its iron embrace; its grasp tightens and the tree is shaken violently. The machine's action is already present, apparent to all; the purpose for which man devised it, though, is yet to be seen.

For one moment, the machine eases up from its thunderous shaking and loosens its grip on the tree. The dust begins to settle; the sweaty bodies leave the tree alone and begin to gather its fruit. The camera zooms in on the leaf-covered branch. Its moving gaze falls on the weary branch, swaying frailly, limp after the excitement, after the brutal shaking.

For one moment, in a cloud of dust and sweat, in the midst of the motor's deafening racket, the man waves a long, thin stick to beat the tree branches, and the camera captures a pair of wings—wings spread over the man's back. For a moment the camera's eye goes past the surprising print and continues onward, perhaps missing it, but then it returns to encounter the wings on the man's chest. The enormous wings, the wings of an angel, or perhaps of a bird of prey, are perfectly symmetrical, merging with the rays of the sun that peek through the branches.

For one moment, the net is spread below the trees; the net knows its job, which it has performed countless times. The camera follows the man's movements as he spreads the net along the path between the trees. With the grace and the deftness of a dancer he overcomes the defiance of the net, which threatens time and time again to fold up into itself.

And in another moment, when the huge net stops trapping the rolling olives, and the man, who has already giving up on sifting through the branches, leaves the demesne of the fruitful tree, the noise vanishes. The camera zooms in on the olives, still moving, slowly rolling from inertia, falling one on top of the other, wearily, feebly, to their final resting place. One moment and another moment, and yet another, that together make up *Mesik*, an olive harvest that is no longer merely a harvest.

The video *Mesik*, which presents a scene from an olive harvest, is an outstanding sample of Sigalit Landau's video repertoire. Her other videos always depict an imaginary scene, unknown, surprising, and nameless, evading any definable scenario or situation. Women trace out an infinity sign on the beach, again and again, endlessly, in *Dancing for Maya*,

and the sea rolls in, repeatedly erasing the sign. A woman is trapped in a spiral of wounded watermelons that slowly makes its way to some unknown destination. Mermaids throw themselves on the beach, and their fingernails leave behind furrows ... of despair? Or a mark of hope? Someone is painting a window frame alternately in black and white. A girl crawls under a table of adults, tying their shoelaces to each other. Each video is created from assembling and disassembling, from breaking or unraveling a familiar association through surprising combinations related to a familiar game of distant childhood (drawing in the sand at the beach, the Israeli sea/sand game, hula hoop), but with an unexpected element that shatters the familiar memory—the possibility of giving it the name or meaning we are used to. What does the childhood game with a knife, played on the beach at Ashqelon, have in common with a border? What is the significance of the girl's game of tying the shoelaces of those seated at the table? How should we understand the connection between the Dead Sea salt that crystallizes in a thick layer on work shoes and the ice lake in Poland that is melted by the penetrating force of the southern salt? The scenes depicted in previous works are perched on the limits of the comprehensible, in an enigmatic friction between the combinations that Landau devises, between the possibility and impossibility of understanding.

From this perspective, her previous videos were "literary," inasmuch as they address our literary sensibility and rouse it, creating a certain tension between the scene and its meaning. *Mesik* is different. This stirring video touches and shakes the "photographicity" of the scene, wrestling with the way the picture, in and of itself, is dependent on the object, the scene, the situation—as these, as they are, impose themselves on the photograph, in their full existence. This, in turn, reveals photography's ability to effect an aesthetic change in the scene through the power of the camera, displaced from the general, universal space to that of absolute singularity.

The olive harvest, a familiar scene that is already charged with meaning, has long been caught in cultural and political discourse, in history, and in the current events of a place and of a people. But not only is this a scene that already has a name and a cluster of meanings it carries with it; it was photographed as it took place. It is a video of a scene "that-has-been," to quote Ronald Barthes in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. It is a photograph of a ready-made event, which is ostensibly presented to us as it

is, as given. And when given to us, we, aloof city dwellers, are surprised to discover that the trees do not willingly shed their olives, in a spirit of giving; rather, a machine with clamps is needed, and an invasive act of brutal shaking forces the olives to let go of the tree. Even if viewers, in their ignorance, are surprised to discover that an olive harvest is a dusty, stressful, and demanding ordeal, and not a harmonious interaction between man, nature, and fruit—all the same, and despite the surprise, we are looking at the harvest, and the camera, which seems to have come upon this unexpected scene by chance, captures the event and the workers unprepared, not ready for it. The harvest was there before the camera, which came only to capture, to snatch something for viewers' eyes.

In Sigalit Landau's previous videos, the meaning remains undefined, evading us along the borders of an event we see as bizarre, uncanny, incomprehensible. They leave viewers rummaging through its envelope for ways of interpreting the event in light of the familiar. They leave us in the domain of failure; although they point us towards certain symbols or signs, there is always some mistake, so that the interpretation cannot capture it completely. In contrast, and precisely in this ready-made video, Landau brings the relationship between movement and thought, between the event and its meaning, to the limits of total exposure. It is precisely this ready-made event that reveals the full acuteness of the power of photographic art to shake up Ronald Barthes' "given" familiarity, shaking up the way the familiar scene is presented to us in its entirety, in its full meaning and implications, and the power of the aesthetic gaze to extricate something that is seemingly indifferent to our glance, objective in relation to sensory involvement, from its status as given a priori. If, in her previous videos, the camera made the scene into art by violating the automatic relationship between the act and its purpose, between the context and its meaning, here the camera turns the scene into art by shattering its habitual and familiar nature and bringing it to its syntactic cusp, where its meaning is stripped bare, where its singularity is no longer identical to itself, no longer a scene identical to others like it.

The thing is not identical to itself. Under the camera's eye it acquires a certain excess beyond its familiar givenness. This is how, in *Mesik*, Sigalit Landau brings the struggles of the video camera to their artistic limit, revealing anew the relationship between art and image, illustrating how art can transform a random, banal, and familiar event into one that is singular—a singularity that defies identification, classification, or mapping based on previous knowledge.

### 1. The indifference of the "that-has-been"

Barthes' approach to photography greatly influenced how photography has been understood for many years. Barthes—in contrast to Walter Benjamin's idea that reproduction is what determines the sensible world created by the image—demonstrated that photographic images have two facets (and not just one, as implied by Benjamin): the aspect of information, of the general properties of the object photographed; and that of affect, of the way in which the image rouses in viewers something beyond what is included in it. In the context of photography, these two aspects (which Barthes calls *studium* and *punctum*) are linked with the object's indifferent presence in front of the camera (a photograph of a boy, a dog, or a house depicted in their general and universal characteristics), given in the overall banality of its existence, as well as in the indifference of the raw presence of the specific object that appears in the photograph, as if forcing itself on the camera. In other words, this is the indifference both of the representation and of the artistic image. The scene "that has been" directly imposes itself on the light-sensitive surface, which remains indifferent to the uniqueness of both what has been photographed and of the viewer's eye. For Barthes, photography is the ultimate embodiment of this indifference of the representation of an object that-has-been, because the details that appear in the frame, like the photograph itself, are meaningless and indicate only the fact of their own existence.

### 2. Deliberate action

From the moment the olive harvest is captured, placed under the camera's eye, subjected to the moving lens, it is no longer self-identical. The indifference of the scene to the gaze is undermined and a sensory surplus, an excess of ideas, is generated. For instance, the way in which the purposeful acts that are motivated by the reason and goal of picking the olives (the machine's movement, the folding of the net, the waving of the stick, the violent shaking) are emptied of their original meaning and detached from the initiative that led to them. Under the camera's eye and the viewer's gaze, there is no longer a possibility of seeing the event, the olive harvest, as self-identical. A is no longer identical with A. The camera has stopped being another mechanical impression of the scene "that has been"; instead, it is a gaze in motion, which takes place at a necessary remove from the scene—a distance that is selected to make sure we do not lose the object. In practice, though, we do lose it, but then find it again. The camera's gaze essentially transforms what we see. The identity of the scene is constituted within the lack of identity between the *Mesik* project and its implementation. What is seen in the olive harvest will never be what the

scene was intended to be. The camera transforms the harvest into something other than it was before the camera was present (whereas in her earlier videos, the camera created the scene that was produced solely for it). The body of the man-laborer in its dance-like motions, the branches that sway to a secret rhythm, the rolling, the lightning—all of these are superfluous for the movement. That is, what is seen does not indicate meaning or a title; rather it leaves each element turned in on itself, alien to its context, so that it can no longer be positioned in relation to the purpose of the act. The camera carves out a space between the thought and the movement, making it impossible to see its own motion as a mediating element that transforms what is seen into an element of thought. Thought is no longer a form of mediation, but of alienation from what is seen; a sort of third subject, or a third force that creates a distance or space between the scene and itself. A is not identical to A.

3. The movement of the camera in relation to thought  
The camera's motion imbues the scene with meaning. Its motion has direction, purpose, and context; it is meant to transform the indifferent event into a visual image, to infuse it with a meaning that stems from the sensible physicality exposed by the camera. The camera's act is complex, however: its motion does not induce the olive harvest scene to converge into any form of harmonious organization or significance, even though its function in the scene is that of an agent of thought. That is, its perspective is that of deliberate, measured thought about the object that is seemingly under its power; thought that indicates and emphasizes the discontinuous nature of the event, the way it will always be foreign in relation to what appears. Belonging and not belonging to the event described. The harvest is what appears to the gaze by virtue of the camera, but remains foreign to it; an object that has been invaded, whose exposure, is consequently a violation of order and infringement of boundaries. Thus, the gaze leaves the thought/camera—whose movements are thought out and measured—foreign to the event described, failing in the attempt to organize or imbue the harvest with any sort of social, symbolic, or political meaning. Where the thought/camera appears, a vacuum opens wide.

4. The absolute singularity of the universal gesture:  
the one that does not represent the many.  
In an article on photography, Jacques Rancière, a French philosopher born in 1940, asserts that in photography, the indifference of the general case, the photograph of the universal object, is always already tainted by absolute singularity. In this sense, it is precisely photography, which bears the mark of the object's total indifference in its

universality, that creates a visual singularity that cannot be distorted, violated, or lost—unless we attempt to give the photograph a meaning or interpret its effects. Referring to Richard Avedon's famous photograph of the wrinkled face of "William Casby, born a slave," Rancière shows how the viewer's gaze extracts from the photographed face—the face of the ex-slave who functions as a universal representative of the history of slavery, representing those who "had been there"—precisely this total singularity that sloughs off any social or historical affiliation. It is the absolute particularity of this face, here and now, that defies any reading in historical terms or social context. This is the displacement of the overall event from the realm of indifference of the universal to the domain of the indifference of the singular. Photography, writes Rancière, is capable of employing a medium that is impersonal, essentially indifferent, in order to sever the indifferent object from its identity; that is, to transform the banal into the singular through the power of the aesthetic gesture:

To change the form of life's banality into the artistic spark of indifference, an indifference that is merely the meeting point, the point of tension between the artistic effect that characterizes the artist's work and the aesthetic sensitivity added to the lives of indifferent objects.

That is, indifference is attributed to the observing subject but is also in the object of the look, which, through the power of the aesthetic gaze, is emptied of all objective information regarding its status or position in the social hierarchy, thus becoming an absolute singular embodiment of what we had not seen before, of what we cannot possibly fathom and whose meaning we cannot unravel. This is the power of the aesthetic gaze.

The camera's motion never folds upon itself. Its motion relays knowledge about the indifferent object, knowledge that has nothing to do with the political, ideological, or social. This is the power of the camera, and this the power of the aesthetic gaze that transforms the indifferent into poetry; the "that-has-been" into an impersonality that transcends everything it encompasses or that is encompassed in the knowledge that was present to begin with.

The olive harvest: the intentional, skillful, "professional" action has a purpose. But the camera's motion breaks up the action, the event, the moving entity, through thought that appears as an empty space. What is it all for? In the end, the olives return to the soil and the mermaids to the sea, and the lines traced in the sand are erased by the waves. But the harvest scene is no longer what it has been.