



MOVING TO STAND STILL

All good stories begin or end at the sea. From Homer to Virginia Wolfe, Wim Wenders and Salman Rushdie, artists have always mined this territory as a site of origin or as a threshold, a boundary to leave from, to stop at, or to be crossed – a place to find one’s own story and the purpose of a journey. At the shoreline, the aimless movement of wandering heroes reaches a crucial turning point, a moment of choice that gives them a sense of self and direction. The sea, itself in constant movement, its waters in perpetual transformation, becomes a symbolic space of transition. In Sigalit Landau’s video work, the sea is often the setting in which seemingly futile movement acquires meaning and transcends its confinement.

The seashore is the site of one of Landau’s first video performances, *Barbed Hula* (2000). Here, Landau is spinning a barbed wire hoop around her bare waist, in a continuous movement rendered endless through the repetitive looping of the recorded gesture. The naked, vulnerable body reaches its physical boundaries with each thrust, each time painfully reminded of its limitations. Presumably, the artist could stop and free herself from this harmful constraint, but she chooses to continue spinning, perpetuating a cycle comparable to an endurance exercise or an ecstatic trance. By persisting in this movement, she doesn’t seem to seek a way out, but rather a way in, or within. While constantly pushing against the encircling border, the body creates space for itself – between its wounded flesh and the wounding spikes. Within these limits, as long as the movement persists, an inner balance is attainable.

The sea is visible in the background, behind the figure of the artist. The pulse of the waves echoes the rhythmic propulsion of the hoop. In her statements, Landau discloses that the location is specifically the Mediterranean seashore, which makes the relationship between the edge of land and the barbed wire circle readable as a parallel between two kinds of boundaries. As Israeli writer David Grossman states in one of his essays, “Incidentally, the only border that Israelis find instinctively clear and concrete is their western one – the sea. If I were to say this in Israel, everyone would nod understandingly, although the notion may not be very politically correct. (It is interesting that the sea, the most unstable, fluid, and deceptive natural element, is the one that in our perception is the *only* stable border.)”¹

The notion of the ever-shifting sea as practically the only fixed frontier of a nation whose wandering ancestors have never known a stable home within unquestioned boundaries is deeply significant. As Grossman further explains, these circumstances reflect the diasporic history of the Jewish people and the inherent trauma of constant displacement amid hostile lands.² His thoughtful considerations on the historical and psychological roots of Israel’s current geo-political situation provide an interesting framework for reading Landau’s video works. Viewed through the lens of Grossman’s argument, *Barbed Hula* sets up a central, double-edged metaphor that reverberates in different incarnations throughout the five other pieces that comprise the artist’s exhibition at the Koffler Gallery.

On the one hand, the wounds inflicted upon the artist’s body by the barbed wire spikes acquire symbolic meaning. They allude to the emotional wound imprinted on the collective memory of the Jewish people by centuries of displacement and recurrent tragedy leading up to the trauma of the Holocaust and further to the present

day conflict. On the other hand, the artist’s effort to continue moving and thus constantly recreate the space within the confining borders of the hoop, reference the historic as well as current individual and national struggle to achieve stability and definition. These two ideas put forth by *Barbed Hula* – the notion of endless movement in search of a place of belonging and the indelible wound of a traumatic history as well as a disputed present – are intrinsically bound. They express to a great extent the contemporary Israeli condition, but also reach beyond borders to articulate a powerful discourse on identity.

The notion of pervasive movement and its determining connection with the memory of wounds recurs as a guiding thread throughout Landau’s other video works presented at the Koffler Gallery. In *Day Done* (2007), Landau references a diasporic custom meant to remember the biblical destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – the original wound. Traditionally, the eastern wall of a newly built house would be left unfinished and unpainted in memory of the Churban, the devastation of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people. No house was meant to be fully a home again until reparation and return were possible.

Landau’s camera focuses on the east-facing façade of a dilapidated house in South Tel Aviv. The artist appears in one of the windows, holding a paint roller. Her arm extends as far out as it can reach to gradually paint a black circle around the casement through a repeated, radial movement. Accumulating like a staining sundial shadow, the black paint creates the illusion of a black hole, a wound, or a target on the house – both the reminder and anticipation of destruction. When Landau finishes, a man takes her place and paints a white circle over her black one. Seemingly an attempt at erasure, his action only makes the mark more visible. No longer in the Diaspora, established now as a nation within its own state, the Jewish people still bears the wound of exile. Landau’s gesture not only reenacts the impossibility of forgetting, but also warns against such a move toward oblivion.

Further delving into the lay of the Promised Land, Landau’s scrutiny turns to the Dead Sea with her 2005 video, *DeadSee*. Situated on the edge of the Judean Desert, more than 400 meters below sea level, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth. This barren body of water whose salt levels prevent any form of life and where any submerged object can rapidly become encrusted in saline crystals is sought by tourists for the therapeutic benefits of its nourishing minerals. However, its water levels are diminishing at an alarming pace due to massive exploitation for agricultural purposes and the site is dangerously nearing the state of ecological disaster. Ironically, one of the most prolific crops thriving in this environment are watermelons – sweet and thirst-quenching fruits.

Hovering above the still surface of the sea, the camera pans out to slowly reveal a monumental spiral made of 500 watermelons that are strung together and floating on the buoyant salty waters. The artist’s body is coiled within the makeshift structure. She hangs on to the string with her outstretched arm, reaching toward a group of fruits that have been split open, their red flesh exposed like a wound. As the movement of the camera ascends, the spiral slowly unravels, gradually releasing the artist’s bare body and disappearing off-frame until only the greenish blue of the sea remains. The outcome of this movement stays ambiguous, uncertain whether the watermelon circle initially confines or protects the figure and whether by unraveling, it frees or rather exposes her. An interpretation in the latter sense seems





arguable in the context of Landau's other works. Ravished nature and human frailty derive from the failure of a desire to conquer and render fertile the desert.

The site and crystallizing properties of the Dead Sea reappear throughout Landau's works as material and subject of investigation. The saline water acts as preserving agent, arresting memory within its crystalline casing. Using a process developed over many years of artistic practice, Landau submerged a pair of shoes in the Dead Sea to be shaped by salt crystals. The resulting objects are the protagonists of *Salted Lake* (2011). Part of the artist's monumental installation at the 54th Venice Biennale along with *Azkelon* (2011) and *Laces* (2011), the video takes the viewer as witness as the salt-covered shoes slowly melt the frozen surface of the lake in Gdańsk. For the first time, Landau stages her filmed performance on a location outside of Israel, returning to one of the most charged sites in the memory of Jewish trauma – Poland.

Shoes have long been imprinted in post-Holocaust visual vocabulary as ghostly reminders of human loss and destruction. Here, the salted shoes – in fact worker boots – reference the Solidarity resistance movement started by Lech Wałęsa in the late 1970s and 80s in the shipyard seen in the background. The salt covering further attempts to metaphorically emphasize and preserve these distressing associations. It also seems to camouflage the shoes into their surroundings, imitating the materiality of snow on the icy expanse of the Polish lake. The salt, however, acts against the ice, slowly eroding it and piercing two holes through which the shoes eventually disappear. The weight of the salt-encased, memory-laden objects cuts through the cold waters of forgetfulness, leaving another dark wound of remembrance.

In *Barbed Hula*, *Day Done*, *DeadSee* and *Salted Lake*, Landau occupies and negotiates the interior of a circle. Each time, the figure of the artist – or the pair of shoes as a stand-in – is at the centre, incessantly re-creating a space for herself within this circular border. *Azkelon* turns the individual struggle into interactive exchange through a children's game of borders on the beach. The video shows an aerial view of three teenagers playing at knife throwing. Their ability to plant the knife into the sand dictates their turn to divide and retrace their section of a circle, constantly moving the borders that separate one's territory from the others'. The traditional circular outline of the game, however, has been eliminated. The video starts with the three youths coming together to a starting point and drawing three lines diverging equidistantly from the centre to the edge of the frame. The space remains open behind them, so arguably the territories they are parceling could extend to any number of border lines as their final frontier, encompassing the beach or the entire world. The ground itself is being wounded and endlessly moved around, rendering meaningless all lines drawn in the sand – both literal and figurative.

Locating the performance once again on the Mediterranean shore, this time between Ashkelon and Gaza (the video's title is a hybrid of these two names), Landau invests the game of borders with deeper meaning. Gaza, populated mostly by Palestinian refugees, and Ashkelon, established by Jewish immigrants from Arab countries, are separated by a border on that beach. The youths in the video seem to create, through their interaction, a space of play and, therefore, of communication. Play ensures a safe place in which to propose and practice a way of relating to reality. The open-endedness of the movement within the implied circle evokes the possibility of resolution of larger conflicts.

When the game is transposed to an actual negotiation table in *Laces* (2011), the outcome differs. While adults discuss potentially serious implications above, a young girl plays a private game under the table, tying the participants' shoelaces together into a circle. Her gesture articulates a hopeful call to overcome the perceived impossibility of connection. In light of the interpretation proposed thus far, it can be argued that the individuals are being persuaded to rise above personal or national histories of trauma to look at the ties that bind across boundaries. But playing and reality don't align here. The child's relational game is undone by the adults' decision to extricate themselves and move away, leaving the tied shoes behind. The little girl is left alone and dismayed, inside the laced circle.

The set-up of the video frame is meant to make evident the likely impact of the adults' interaction on the child's future – the present decision-making generation affecting the next one who will inherit the consequences of their choices. The child holds the solution, but not the power to enact it. It is up to the adults at the table to work together. The empty shoes evoke again the connotations suggested in *Salted Lake*, alluding once more to the perpetuation of unhealed wounds. Evading the circle, on the move again, the negotiators fail to establish a common ground for a livable solution.

The vicious circle seems to close in. Expulsion, the initial blow generating a centrifugal movement towards Diaspora, inflicted a lasting wound, the cause of further wandering and instability. To finally re-establish a homeland in Israel and recover a national identity, an acceptance of set borders becomes crucial in order to achieve definition and stability despite the wounds. Erasure and forgetting are impossible, but the deep-seated instinct to perpetuate migration and displacement needs to be resolved. Each one of Landau's videos contains the offering of a moment of transcendence, the pivotal moment of choice toward an imaginable resolution. Though set up as repeating loops where action endlessly begins and fails in an ostensibly inescapable cycle, the works imply that the solution lies inside the boundaries, not in a breakout. The repetitive, confined movement becomes akin to stillness, summoning transformation from within.

Transposing the lens from the individual to the nation, when stillness/stability is achieved within permanent, uncontested borders, the land becomes a home. Addressing the Israeli context, the choice to which Landau's gestures allude is that of resolving what Grossman calls "the critical dilemma of [the Jewish people's] entire existence: the question of whether it is a 'nation of place' or a 'nation of time.'"³ Landau's movements in time hold the potential to become a purposeful journey home, seeking to set roots in place. And by the sea, the universal human quest resounds.

Mona Filip
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¹ David Grossman, "Contemplations on Peace," *Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p 108.

² *Ibid.*, p 109.

³ *Ibid.*

Sigalit Landau was born in Jerusalem in 1969 and graduated from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in 1995. She currently lives and works in Tel Aviv. Her complex works engaging a wide range of media address social, humanitarian and ecological issues, exploring homelessness, exile, and the relationships between victim and victimizer, between decay and growth. Landau has participated in the 1997 and 2011 Venice Biennale, Documenta X, Kassel, 1997, the Armory Show, New York, 2005, and the Art Focus International Biennial of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Herzliya, 1994, 1996 and 2005. She has received numerous awards, including the Ingeborg Bachman Scholarship, 1997, Artist-in-Residence at the Hoffmann Collection, Berlin, 1999, the ArtAngel/Times Commission, London, 2000, and IASPIS Artist-in-residence, Stockholm, 2003.

Image Credits

All images: Sigalit Landau | Cover: *Azkelon* (video still detail), 2011 | Inside cover (top to bottom): *Day Done* (video still), 2007; *DeadSee* (video still), 2005 | Pages 3-4: *Barbed Hula* (video still), 2000 | Page 5 (top to bottom): *Salted Lake* (video still), 2011; *Laces* (video still), 2011.



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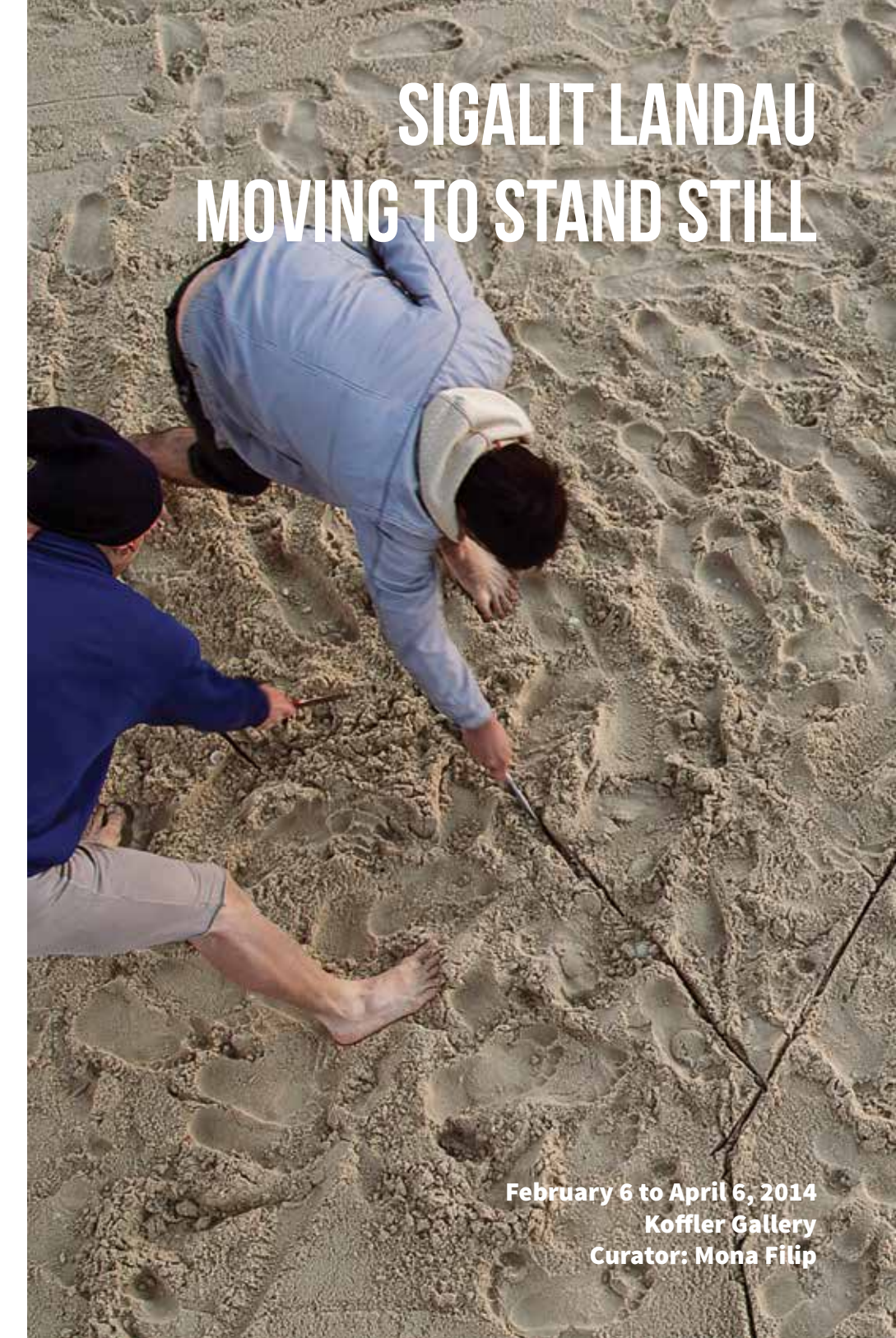


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