



"Those that are near. Those that are far."

WALID RAAD & SITU Studio's Synagogue Project

Opening Words

Almút Sh. Bruckstein

June 08, 2016

Zum Artikel im House of Taswir: <http://house-of-taswir.org/2016/06/walid-raad-situ-studio/>

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Walid Raad and SITU Studio have created a dramatic scene for the Synagogue in Stommeln. An escape route, a hole in the ground, hatchway with tripod and spool, a block and tackle as is otherwise only used in canal work or other excavations. The windows bordered up, the earth piled up, there is the scent of rain, the earth marked with impressions, traces of storage in neat rows and lines, crates—we see the impressions of crates, in variations typical for wood crates, typically used for art shipping, they may have been heavy, and are now gone. The entire synagogue is taken in by this scene, only from the women's section the visitor gets a glimpse onto what is left there to see. Beyond reach, beyond proof, no double-checking. The regularity of the impressions on the dark and heavy sand transmits a kind of architecture—one could almost think that the elevated mounds along the walls were seating accommodations, as if someone or something had sat there, leaning his or her back on the wall, someone or something now absent. We know nothing about the fate of the objects removed and their attendants. We do not know where the opening leads, who used it as an escape route, we know nothing about its subterranean branching, which dangers those who fled exposed themselves to when they were digging it, do not know which ruler or hangman forced this flight, if

those who fled survived, what happened to them underground, and if they see light at the end of the tunnel, we do not know.

Surely we can assume that the opening, once it existed, was also used by others. By smugglers, for instance, or rescuers who used the false floor to move objects, art objects, possibly, or other stuff, money, weapons, jewelry that had found shelter there, past borders; possibly all of the synagogue's precious objects, too. It is surely a hiding spot for secretcies, for secret deals, for the forbidden, secret love referred to in the Song of Songs: "Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready."

What happened to the crates and objects? This is surely an important question for the synagogue. In this respect, we might want to examine an earlier work by Walid Raad. This piece is called "Another Letter to the Reader"—an installation with brown moving boxes made of paper or wood that was shown at the most recent Istanbul Biennale. There are holes cut out of the long side of the boxes, holes that could in part serve as escape routes for objects stored. The background: at the beginning of World War One, the Young Turk Minister of War Enver Pasha, one of the main perpetrators of the genocide on the Armenians, had all the precious courtly Iznik pottery be stored in a

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subterranean bank safe in order to protect it from the war. [This Enver Pasha, by the way, was also the military attaché of the Ottoman Empire in Berlin during World War I, and a close friend of the director of the Museum for Ancient Near Eastern Cultures, today called Museum for Islamic Art, Friedrich Sarre.] The artist for obvious reasons rushed to assist the Iznik ceramic. He understood that their wonderful red, blue, and green-colored tulips, birds and animal motifs could be damaged by false protectors, that objects need escape routes in order to be liberated from political usurpation, and that most importantly, it is the violence of its *protectors* that deprives the object of all its colors.

And here, in this synagogue? Where are its objects, items, furniture – where is the *Aron haKodesh*, the ark with the glowing scrolls, where are all of the silver devices, the vestments of the Torah, its silver crowns, where are the velvet curtains with the blue or golden Hebrew lettering, the Aramaic banners promising the community a future full of peace, the lectern for the readings, the delicate silver hand of the reader, so that the hands do not touch the scriptures, where are the benches of the praying, the reader's lectern, all those beautiful carpets, and lamps and books of prayers, etc.? We know the story of the Jewish community in Cologne

that sold its synagogue to a German farmer in 1926, who then used it as a shed, which then protected them from the Nazi's pogroms, nevertheless: are these objects in danger, even if they might be protected and well-guarded in the display cases of museums, libraries, and private collections? What happens to the memories, what about their shadows, are they in danger? Captured, occupied, threatened by the violence of their protectors?

Could Walid Raad and SITU Studio have possibly prepared the scene we see in order to direct our gaze to a scene of flight, perilous and risky in its discovery, namely the flight of "Jewish" object, or more precisely, of their shadows that have been held in a stranglehold – in Germany – for over seventy years? Should we imagine that they, the "Jewish" objects, or their shadows, may have used the tunnel themselves—as a path out of captivity, due to the militancy of their protectors? All the liturgical objects, the Torah, the prayer books, possibly even the entire Rabbinical tradition itself, which since the beginning of time and in seventy languages and in all places, all countries, has promised its devotees heaven on earth, not tolerating that it is enclosed by separation walls that are stealing the air for it to breathe, a tradition that does not suffer any territorial borders except that of Scripture itself with its

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wide open margins, black fire on white fire, escape ways of white ink between letters? A tradition of which their Arabic-Jewish scholars said in the 10th century: *En ummatenu ela betoratenu* – we know of no *umma*, no nation, except for that of this wide open margin?—Is it conceivable that after the Shoah—even seventy years later—this tradition of the margins white open is so much under duress in Germany that it desperately needs a Lebanese Beirut/New York artist to escape the duress by digging a hole in the ground of the synagogue, a tunnel?

The Arabic-Jewish cosmopolitans of the 13th century in Al-Andalus and Maghreb, and the German-Jewish cosmopolitans of the 20th century in Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Wroclaw, and Hamburg understood Jewish tradition to be an unbridled promise. A promise that scattered the power of hope across the world, into all languages, all places, till it will be restored by the tiny passageway of the Messiah. Rabbinic tradition was once unanimously sure that *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world, is the sole meaning of Torah. That is also why, and I am quoting an older Arabic-Jewish source, no political sovereignty should be granted to the children of Israel before two things do not cease: war and violence; injustice and poverty. But most importantly, in keeping with this ancient source, Jewish tradition,

with all its objects, cannot ever find shelter in a place that requires barbed wire, atomic bombs, and torture. The events of the 20th century made this position disappear twice. Here in these German lands, this tradition has withdrawn through the annihilation of what was then called "this entire border crossing, unpatriotic Jewish spirit". And Israel itself followed to then officially declare the Jewish diaspora to be a thing of the past.

The "negation of the Diaspora," literally "*shelilat hagolah*" is the highest *raison d'état* of the "Jewish" state. But what about the virtues of exile, the cosmopolitan esprit, the surplus of diaspora, ferment of fragmentation, the hard learned lessons gained on fleeting wanderings between worlds? The virtues of exile have irrevocably withdrawn from the objects of the synagogue—of this one and of all the others—for reasons of the State. Almost 70 years by now, that state keeps claiming all things Jewish, every object, every book, every work of art, every word ever uttered by Jewish lips, all those German archives, all those Arabic libraries, the old synagogue in Cairo, the state claims everything for itself, its large national library in Jerusalem, it lays claim on everything [Jewish]. Because that is the consequence of the NO to fragmentation that from that point on all objects are in the stranglehold of this confiscation, regardless

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of whether they belong to the past or the future, or have not even started yet to be created.

Walid Raad is sensitive to this stranglehold that threatens the objects' soul, their very breath and life. It is not the colors that the objects miss—as it was the case with the Ottoman tulip patterns. I fear it is their very breath, their *nafas*, their breathing souls that the objects have lost. In an atmosphere full of thoughtless fidelity to the blue-and-white flag, their lives are hanging from a thread. Walid Raad and SITU studio have begun an operation of resuscitation. They created paths of escape for air and a false floor for the resurrection of nearly suffocated objects.

Do we know how the resuscitation takes place?

It is a mixture of poetry, architecture, and mathematics that Walid Raad develops as an increasingly refined technique of flight and reanimation of occupied and imprisoned objects. The objects need a new home, one that gives them room to breathe. One that is as open as the scripture once was, when it was still read from its open margins. "*En ummatenu ela betoratenu*"—we have no *umma* except for this scripture with its open fringes. A new house? What is that? What is a house?

The rabbis have a great answer for this: a house is not defined by its roof, its walls, or its windows, but rather: its door. Where a door is, there is also a house. In order to solve some problems of the halakha on Shabbat, the rabbis start to expand the opening of the house. They delineate the opening—and make the walls and fences thinner and thinner until they disappear for this continually enlarged opening of the house. Are walls or fences necessary then, to build a home? Yes, the rabbis say, but only in as much as it is necessary *to make the opening of the house visible*. Walls in rabbinic tradition are delineated to become infinitesimally nothing. Tunneled paths are the mirror of infinite openings.

Thus are the openings we see in the work of Walid Raad. They give the confiscated objects air to breathe. The works of Walid Raad are full of such openings. One of them now assumes the form of a mirror-enlightened escape hole in this synagogue. A mathematician friend from Mexico once seriously entertained the question of whether infinities with holes can touch or even kiss each other. The more we engage with the works of Walid Raad, the more this question gains plausibility. Yes, infinities can kiss each other. The living and the dead can unite, and old, sadly alienated traditions, when liberated from their protectors, may enjoy

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surprisingly beautiful encounters, beyond the grip of war. They do so in places of a diaspora that actually does not exist.

However, are there not an increasing number of workshops happening in Beirut on Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Aby Warburg, Paul Celan, Hannah Arendt? An increasing number of Arabic artists interested in the libraries locked away in the cellars of the old synagogues in Cairo? Jewish-Iraqi artists suddenly realizing that they are Arabs?

Infinites can kiss. The tunnel is a hiding place for secrecies, for forbidden, secret love, and for the wonder of transformation sung of in the Song of Songs: "Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready."

Almút Sh. Bruckstein for Walid Raad

Translation from the German by **Bradley Schmidt**,
slightly modified by the author.