

COURTING ABSENCE, RESTORING PRESENCE

ORI GERSHT AND THE MOVING IMAGE

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Ori Gersht's art challenges viewers to reconsider their understanding of what a moving-image work is and how it can be experienced. Time, space, and event become unfixed and evasive in his creations. The film theorist Laura Mulvey has commented that an "aspiration to preserve the fleeting instability of reality and the passing of time" underlies the technological development of film and photography.⁽¹⁾ It is precisely this instability of both reality and memory that Gersht is concerned with when he challenges viewers' habitual modes of approaching a moving-image work. The artist has described his work in video in terms of "visual dialectics of what was but no longer is...an ever-returning presence that is ultimately an eternal absence, something

missing in action and gone forever.”**(2)** Indeed, he keeps returning to the interval between wholeness and destruction. He revisits the gaping abyss in time between life and death, that pregnant moment that couples acute awareness of and anxiety over what is already absent with an agonizing consciousness of a presence that is slipping away from our grasp.

Three of his more recent video works, *Offering*, *Will You Dance for Me*, and *First to Laugh*, afford in-depth looks at his major themes and aesthetic strategies. Each video oscillates between the cinematic and the non-cinematic in its manipulation of space and time. Deep space, attributable to a cinematic aesthetic, is constantly played against heavily textured surfaces that invite what the film theorist Laura Marks calls a “caressing look,” which we generally associate with painting.**(3)**

We expect that movies will present a sequential evolution of events in a temporally and spatially coherent way. According to standard cinematic con-

ventions, our gaze plunges into a space occupied by what appear to be life-size objects and figures, which move and perform under the known laws of perspective and physics. The medium is meant to be transparent, rendering the viewer momentarily unaware of its mediation by celluloid, or electronic media, and the screen, which forms the material support for the projected image of reality.

When viewing a painting, especially up close, we cannot help but become aware of the materiality of its surface. Even as we discern image and content, we constantly sense the concreteness of paint laid on a ground. The moving-image arts, conversely, tend to rely on the projection of light rather than on any material medium. Yet there are moving-image works of the type Marks calls “haptic,” which do not allow the viewer to penetrate deep space smoothly through a nonresistant, seemingly transparent screen.**(4)** Rather, they render surfaces opaque and textures suggestively tangible, much like that of a

painted canvas. In these works the viewer's gaze is compelled to explore the surface sensually.

In privileging the haptic aesthetic, Gersht often denies the viewer the experience of so-called natural action, which has come to be associated with the cinematic projection rate of twenty-four frames per second. In fact, at certain moments, when he simulates complete stillness, the videos actually pose as paintings. The videos thus stilled invite serene contemplation rather than the constant alertness to change required at the movies. The artist is playing a game with the fleeting moment. In this game he explores not only the medium's capacity to defy the fragility of human existence, capturing the moment and fixing it for endless return viewings, but also its power to reconstitute the intensity of the experience in each and every encounter with the work.

Doing so requires more than conventional cinematic re-presentation. Gersht is able to engage his

viewers sensually through his emphasis on texture and disturbed temporality. He propels the observer into an incessant oscillation between two aspects of aesthetic encounter, which Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has named *meaning effect* and *presence effect*.⁽⁵⁾

Gumbrecht's concepts relate to an endless alternation between deciphering and experiencing, interpreting meaning and feeling presence. Gersht's work is unique precisely in its potent reconstitution of lost presences. As the new-media theorist Mark Hansen maintains, contemporary art that relies on new media is capable of affording "an entirely different regime of visual experience, one that recurs to and expands the central function played by the body" in our experience of a work of art.⁽⁶⁾ Gersht's works present a similar inclination to engage with a fully embodied viewer, who perceives with more than just the eyes, responding to the work through the whole gamut of sensory apparatuses as part of the artist's compelling play with presence effect.

Offering (2012) is a three-channel projection that constitutes a video triptych of panoramic dimensions. The video follows the ceremonial preparations carried out by a Spanish matador before a bullfight. Gersht was granted rare permission to be present with his crew at this very intimate moment, during which the closest male kin of the matador, such as his father or uncle, is entrusted with assisting him with the traditional costume and coiffure. The event, which is edited nonsequentially, is further intercut with close-up views of four paintings: *Portrait of Philip II in Armor* by Titian (1550–51), *Saint Sebastian* by Guido Reni (1617–1619), *Infanta Margarita in Blue Dress* by Diego Velázquez (1659), and *Dead Toreador* by Édouard Manet (1864). Together they span over three hundred years of the history of European art.

Gersht makes us feel the tension between the beauty of the ceremony and its inescapable connotations of death and sacrifice. In the matador's dress-

ing room, everything is meticulously performed according to custom as part of an exclusively male moment that connotes archetypal ritual. When an older man prepares his offspring for a fight that may result in the death—or sacrifice, as the work's title suggests—of either man or beast, the biblical reference is inescapable. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, God asks Isaac's father, Abraham, to sacrifice his son as a test of his faith, but sends an angel at the last minute to save the child. In the context of the bullfight there is always a looming uncertainty as to who will be the victim in the ceremonial enactment of violence. In most bullfights, as in the biblical story, an animal sacrifice is substituted for the human at the last minute.

In Israel, where military service is mandatory, the story of Isaac is also closely associated with the agony of sending one's children to war. In fact, the careful attention to the elaborate garb of the matador brings to mind the significance of the military

uniform, which was historically endowed in Israeli culture with a mystique deriving from post-Holocaust notions of national revival.

Gersht links two central concerns in *Offering*. The first is the idea that violence and bloodshed are deeply rooted in human culture. The second has to do with how the moving image mediates—via its optical and our sensory apparatuses—the fragility of our experience as humans existing within time, place, and body. *Offering* intensely subverts temporal sequencing and spatial orientation; it is probably one of the most complex of the artist's works in this regard, rendering habitual film spectatorship quite impossible. The filmed occurrence is fragmented into segments that vary greatly in size and proximity to the camera, and, most jarringly, are presented out of sequence.

Six minutes into the work, the matador returns to the dressing room to remove his apparel. As the scene begins, however, we are not offered, as might

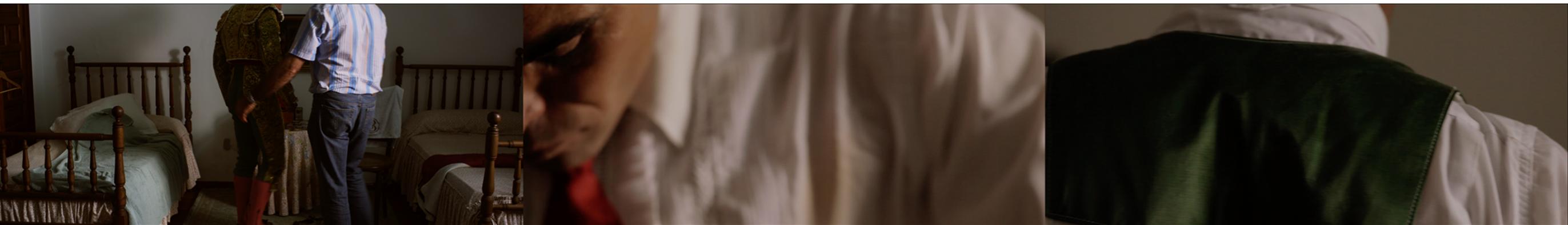
be expected, a view of the man entering the room. Rather, we have the still empty room on the frame to our left, and a close-up view of the bed's wooden headboard on the right. In the middle, a tight shot finds the matador already down to his shirtsleeves and missing his ornate vest. Not until eight seconds later is the viewer given access to the earlier moment, when the uncle enters the room, followed by the bullfighter himself, on the screen at the left. In the meantime, on the central screen the matador continues to undress, while on the screen to our right we get a close-up view of the uncle's torso. At 6:18 the matador is featured on right and central frames, in frontal and rear views simultaneously, still partially undressed, while on the left his process of disrobing is only just beginning.

Watching the extremely unsynchronized temporal progress across the three projections, the viewer experiences a sense of vertigo that is not only temporally but also spatially expressed. As film

viewers we are familiar with, and readily accept, the illusion that motion extends beyond a frame's borders into an unseen virtual space. In *Offering*, our perception of movement through space is complicated, owing to the tight proximity of the three

shown at the back of the room, smaller than screen height, are coterminous with the face of the matador filling the adjoining screen from top to bottom.

A curious effect takes place. Disturbingly as viewers we are unable to construct the expected



projections, which does not allow for space to overflow, so to speak, beyond the frames' boundaries. This visual clash at the screens' seams induces a sensation of unease. Extreme differences in scale further contribute to the tension thus created, as when the face on the middle screen, cut in half along the nose, vies for space with the comparatively small bed on its left (**fig. 3.1**) and when the two men

concept of movement through a continuous space. When this troubling fragmentation is coupled with movement in opposite directions, the viewer receives incoherent sensory cues. In response to the perceptual challenge posed by *Offering*, the viewer becomes caught up in an effort to constitute a new sense of space and time. While the work thus interrupts the natural order reflected in conventional

cinematic editing, it also seems to engage the viewer with heightened intensity. In the terms proposed by Hansen, this generates “a haptic or tactile production of space in which the body itself, deprived of ‘objective’ spatial referents, begins to space or to spatialize, that is, to create space within itself.” (7) Hansen implies that a viewer whose customary viewing practices are frustrated, as is the case in *Offering*, is driven to an unusually intense experience of conceiving space. Deprived of objective spatial cues and coordinates, he or she is compelled to feel one’s way around, as it were, mobilizing senses other than vision alone. It is thus that the intensity of the experience, felt throughout the viewer’s sensing body, is augmented. (8)

By disturbing the expected sequence, the work exceeds the specificity of the event. Rather than merely being shown the instability of the moment, in *Offering* we are made to actually experience the fragility of our perception of time. Time

and event become evasive, escaping our grasp like the kaleidoscopic fragments that unfold across the triple projection.

Gersht’s mobilization of painting likewise interferes with the cinematic paradigm. Suddenly it is not only an individual event that is at stake. A historical dimension is introduced as the brief moment in time that unfolds in the matador’s dressing room is intercut with fragments of the four paintings mentioned earlier.

Details from the paintings, never the entire compositions, fill the frames as close-up images that abound in high-definition textural detail. These painting fragments interface with conventional cinematic shots. Rather than probing deep space, the eye is restricted to the surface of the canvas. The camera glides over the plane, reveling in textural abundance and larger-than-life detail.

The pivotal perceptual dissonances at play in *Offering* are readily apparent in the ending sequence

in a triad of shots at 8:26. In the middle frame, the two beds in the dressing room converge according to traditional perspective. The matador, now wearing strikingly mundane jeans, stands between them, ready to leave. On the two side panels of the video triptych, Gersht presents fragments of Manet's *Dead Toreador*. The painting, cropped by the videographer's frame, moves into view on both lateral projections. First the legs appear on the leftmost screen, clad in delicate white hosiery similar to what we saw the live matador don in the opening sequence. A second later, the projection on the right displays a dead hand clutching the now unneeded kerchief.

The central screen, flanked by the painted surfaces, features a close-up of the matador fastening a belt over his jeans, having carefully packed away his costume in its elaborate leather case. The movement in the side panels clashes with a static camera looking close-up at the bullfighter's waistline. Ironically,

it is the painting that is moving distinctly across space, while the live-action shot remains static and devoid of field depth, as the belt and jeans pockets fill the screen. The heavy folds of the jeans in the center projection resonate with the painted toreador's white girdle on the left, and the kerchief clutched by the hand paralyzed by death on the right. The hand, very slowly moving leftward as the camera tracks right over the painting, is sharply severed by the frame's border. This in turn elicits an uneasy sensation in viewers, who are not allowed room to conceive of the motion mentally as continuous with the space beyond each frame. Again, Gersht does not offer us the comfort of accustomed cinematic spectatorship. Rather, he plunges us into a state in which conflicting visual cues activate bodily responses in unexpected ways.

Note, for example, the tension created along screens' edges, where the blue folds of the jeans meet the white of the creased girdle. This sparks a

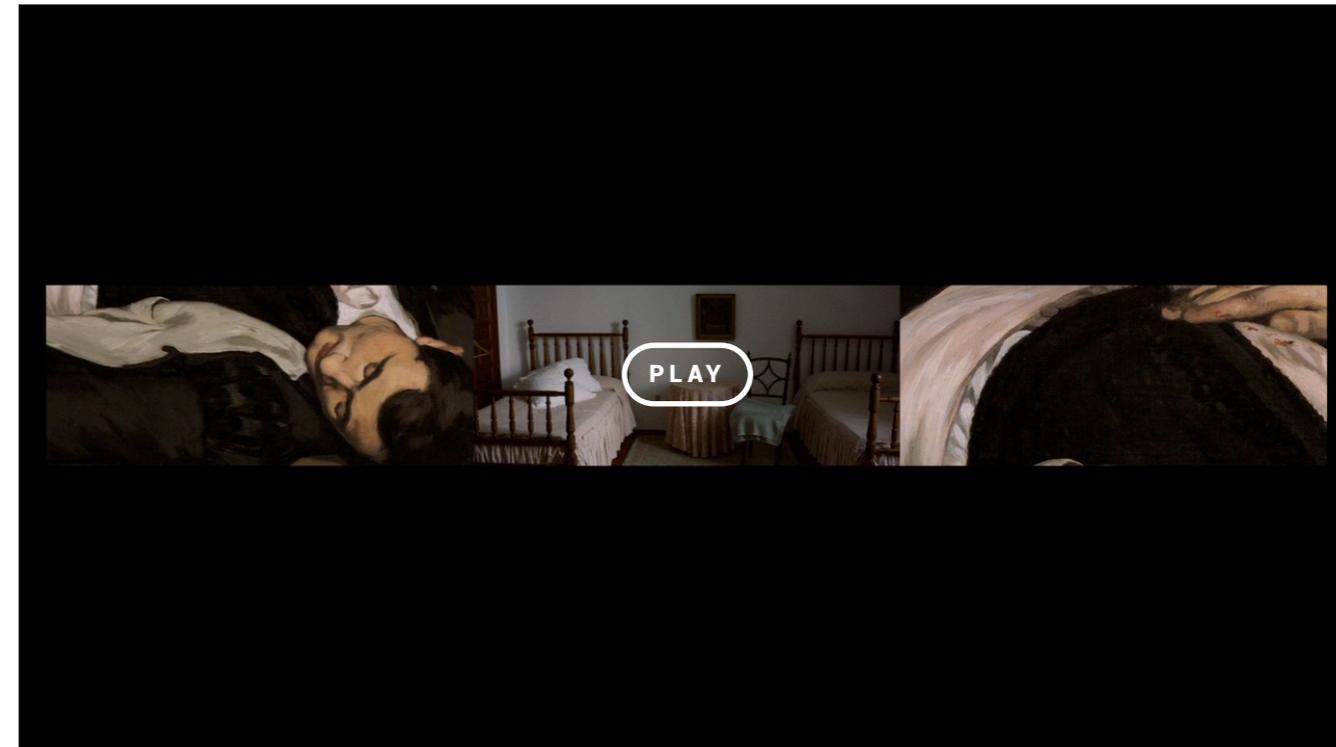


burst of emotional energy in a viewer now fully engaged in reconciling the dissonant moving images into one coherent event. Beyond telling a story, Gersht allows his viewers to experience the sheer intensity of the moment, mobilizing the body in an unaccustomed way in the process. The brief event, preparation for battle under the shadow of impending death, is transformed into an aesthetic experience.

In addition to bringing in paintings to disturb our perception of depth and surface, Gersht deploys them in his subtle play of absence and presence. To understand this, we need to return to the sixty seconds that open the work, when snippets of the matador's ceremonial dressing on the central panel are flanked by close-up views of a young and slightly androgynous Saint Sebastian in a painting by Guido Reni now at the Prado Museum in Madrid (**fig. 3.2**). A shot of the matador's arm as he pulls up the white tights onto his calf and thigh is disorientingly

close-up. The textures of skin and garment are keenly brought to the viewer's attention, rendering the video image barely distinguishable from the Reni painting, whose close-up views of the arrow piercing the martyr's abdomen frame it on the right- and left-hand screens. At first the viewer is at a loss to understand what is happening, or to distinguish between the lateral and central projections in terms of the painting-cinema dialectic. Wouldn't it be as valid to think of the first twenty seconds of *Offering* as cinematizing painting as it is to say that they draw videography very strongly toward painting?

Offering's looped structure underscores how history encapsulates the passing moment and how death frames the brief moment of life. The work opens and closes with the triadic configurations discussed earlier, in which details of the paintings on the lateral screens flank the matador, who has been captured at a specific point in time rehearsing a his-



torical ritual. The moment is played against the timelessness and serenity of the paintings with which it is intercut. The painted figure is fixed forever on canvas and in death, but the matador leaving the room in jeans and shirt is plunged back into the current of time (**fig. 3.3**). The ceremonial costume, neatly packed, will be called forth in future bullfights, ritual confrontations with mortality.

Long seconds after the matador has already vanished from sight, Manet's dead toreador remains

on both lateral screens, surrounding the now empty room. Suddenly, absence and presence paradoxically have switched roles. Whereas the live matador is already missing from the frame, it is the dead toreador, the one conceived of as “gone forever,” who is powerfully, materially present. As the camera tracks across the two lateral projections, the high-definition image offers an abundance of textural detail, inviting the sort of haptic look proposed by Marks, through which we experience the sensation of actually being able to move our gaze as if it were a sensing, touching hand.

In the similarly structured opening triad, Reni’s seventeenth-century *Saint Sebastian* is cropped; we see only the martyr’s head and torso on the left and the abdomen pierced by an arrow on the right. The young body, unnaturally contorted and flexed, leads the gaze up toward the long neck, gentle lips, and captivating innocent expression turned heavenward. Although the painting invokes

violent death, physical torment, and mutilation, it engages the viewer in the contemplation of beauty. As the camera explores the painting up close, the viewer becomes almost physically aware of the tension around the neck and shoulders, the muscles tensed in an upward tilt conveying the martyr’s pain and spiritual strain. While Gersht dwells on the painting with his camera as if to immerse himself, and his viewer, in the lure of beauty and harmony, the progress of the preparations on the central screen, displaying the matador’s torso and bare chest, signals that violence approaches. An analogy and a cultural and historical continuity are drawn across the three channels and their three images of an exposed male body.

The figure of Saint Sebastian, both as myth and more concretely as painting, seems to have overcome the transitoriness of the present moment and become fixed in cultural and visual memory. Flanked on the left by the expressively strained

neck muscles of the martyr, whose myth dates back to the first century CE, and on the right by a view of the same martyr's painfully twisted torso, the living matador assumes an atemporal quality. It is through recourse to painting that Gersht is able to wrest figure and event from the flow of time, suspend their specificity, and reposition them in (art) history.

Transience and eternity, presence and absence, life and death: in *Offering* Gersht plays them dialectically in its multiple projection scheme. None of the triadic projections ever conveys the whole picture, either literally or figuratively. In ensemble, however, the constantly sliding, conflicting, and otherwise interfacing frames are able to invoke precisely that instant in which presence is already shadowed by absence, when to seize the transient instance means also to acknowledge the shadow of death.

The fragile equilibrium that the work maintains between the still and moving image, between

painting and video, suggests a deeper-reaching quest. In his works, and in *Offering* in particular, Gersht is in pursuit of the precise threshold between the stable sense of material presence afforded by painting and the temporal flux of the moving image. The viewer is made acutely aware of the moment as event. At the same time, in each and every viewing the passing instant is reconstituted through the bodily intensity elicited by the work.

Whereas in *Offering* Gersht directed his camera away from his native country and its collective cultural memory, in *Will You Dance for Me* (2011) he touches directly on the memory of the Shoah, the Holocaust, which looms as a shadow over twentieth-century history and haunts the contemporary Jewish collective consciousness, as well as the private memories of the immediate survivors and their offspring. Gersht subtly refrains from showing actual physical traces, or images of the past, in this dual-channel video projection. All we get by way of

history-telling is the voice of a survivor, the now late Yehudit Arnon, which sounds against a darkened screen in the first minute and a half of the work to convey her story in a few concise sentences:

It was like facing death. They stood us in the yard. Suddenly we realized that we were surrounded by machine guns. The officers have requested me to entertain and dance for them on their Christmas party. For the first time in my life I was able to say no. They did not shoot me, as punishment they have stood me out in the snow. I cannot remember for how long I stood out there, and then I promised myself that if I would survive I will dedicate my life to dance.

Then follow thirty seconds of darkened screen before her face emerges from the shadow in the left-hand projection, dramatically lit as though in a Rembrandt portrait, the artist's stated visual reference. It is the image of a vibrant, though

elderly, lady, encapsulating the traces of an ungraspable history.

Following her emigration to Israel after the war, Arnon went on to found the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company. Seated in a rocking chair, she sways back and forth here, performing a minimal abstract dance while seated, unable to move with more bodily force because of her fragile physical condition. Throughout the four and a half minutes that open the work, the right-hand screen remains black, while on the left Arnon repeatedly emerges from the dark, her expressive wrinkled visage coming into the light only to retreat and be swallowed anew by the unlit background. We witness an oscillation similar to that found in *Offering*. On the brink of disappearing into a dark abyss, the figure emerges again and again with the powerful, timeless presence of an Old Master portrait.

The palpability of Arnon's facial topography, coming forth powerfully in the high-definition projection, intensifies our sense of her proximity and presence (**fig. 3.4**). The image appeals to the touch no less than to the gaze, whence comes its power to invoke the pain, the anxiety, and the resilience epitomized by Arnon's Holocaust story. The tangibility of her body is crucial to the work; Gersht has remarked on his childhood encounters with the physically branded arms of Auschwitz survivors, bearing the notorious tattooed numbers, which sent him looking for a survivor of that hell as a protagonist for this video.

The artist strives to wrest the event from the evasiveness of memory, endowing it with an experiential immediacy. Facing the figure alternately emerging into and vanishing from sight, we are never certain whether it will reappear. Each time may be the last. This is particularly true, of course, on a first viewing, but the sense of fragility



is retained throughout subsequent viewings, leaving us constantly aware of the looming potential for absence, even as the figure seems to be projecting out into our own physical space.

Whereas in *Offering* the adjacency of the three screens heightens the tensions among them, in *Will You Dance* the two screens, or projections, are separated by a space. The gap is aesthetically significant in that it allows each projection autonomy. Less engaged in conflict here than in *Offering*, the projections play out a formal dialogue. For four and a half minutes nothing happens on the darkened screen on the right. Finally Arnon's face on the left recedes completely into the dark and snow begins to fall. The first flakes descend against an eerie black background into which the figure has disappeared. Only then does the right-hand screen light up, showing a vast snow-covered landscape. In a few seconds both screens are filled by the whiteness and silence of the landscape, evocative of a cemetery, a



vast repository for buried memories. Gersht's camera pans over the mute landscape, which flows unhindered across the two screens (**fig. 3.5**). The abstract beauty of the infinite white planes does not disclose the horrible ghosts of the past, though they are concretely present in the scarred minds and bodies of the survivors.

For most of the over thirteen-minute piece the projections are not simultaneously active.

Rather, they alternate, one screen darkened while the other is animated with either a slow pan over the snow-covered landscape or the rocking of the human figure back and forth between light and darkness. *Will You Dance for Me* engages the viewer in quite a different mode than *Offering*. It is not primarily tension and conflict at work here, but rather continuity and harmony. This is especially true of the smoothly continuous landscape, extending over the two screens, dominated by expanses of white, which are accentuated by a distant forest. The motion of the landscape toward screen left extends across the two window-like apertures for a minute and a half. Its propulsive force is strongly evocative of a train ride, a highly charged motif which connotes the mass deportation by train of the Jewish population in Europe to concentration and extermination camps during the Holocaust. Gersht also explored these themes in two earlier photographic series, *White Noise* (1999–2000), taken on a train

ride to Auschwitz, and *Liquidation* (2005), which was shot in the town of Kosiv in Poland, where the artist's father-in-law survived Nazi persecution by hiding in the surrounding forest.

In *White Noise* and *Liquidation*, as in *Will You Dance for Me*, no visible trace is left to inform the viewer of the occurrences covered up by the serene landscape. Throughout his oeuvre, Gersht lures the viewer with beauty, which intensifies the shock upon the realization that beneath looms an imminent darkness. Yet, unlike *White Noise* and *Liquidation*, *Will You Dance for Me* is a moving-image piece, which offers the artist an opportunity to manipulate temporal and spatial parameters. First and foremost, the work solicits identification with the bodily motion and facial expressions of its protagonist, Arnon. Following her movements as she brings her hand to her head, then to a slightly raised shoulder, we actively experience the heaviness of her limbs and the intense effort involved in her movements. **(9)**

As we watch Arnon, the memory captured in the work finds an echo in our own bodies. At the same time, we remain aware of its eternal escape from the grasp of representation. Twice in the course of the work Arnon vanishes from sight, as if devoured by the dense darkness of the background. When this happens, we are left peering into the dark, which in a matter of moments flips into a white expanse similarly impenetrable to the gaze. Gersht gives no anchoring point to hold on to, no anecdotal detail as compensation for the absence of the human figure. The serenity of the white planes signals eternity and death, acknowledging the inaccessibility of both to human consciousness. He leaves us wandering in the vast expanses of memory.

Filmed near the end of her life, Gersht's protagonist is at once compellingly present and imminently absent, simultaneously here and already gone forever. Its images streaming across the two projection channels, the work allows a tense

equilibrium to be maintained between the viewer's sensations of presence and its subsequent loss. In *Will You Dance for Me*, the story's narration is independent of the (moving) image. The narrative is in Hebrew in Arnon's voice; an English translation appears in white characters against a black background. Abstracted from all imagistic context, the words dissolve into the darkness. It is primarily through the all-engulfing darkness, the dramatically illuminated figure rocking back and forth, and the expanses of snow-covered land that we experience the work, rather than focusing on signification and the historical and biographical specificity of the work. The artist's very choice to separate text from image in this way privileges the more sensual haptic mode of aesthetic encounter.

First to Laugh (2013) consists of fourteen monitors displaying looped projections of children's portraits (**figs. 3.6a and 3.6b**). Directly facing the camera, the children appear almost motionless (in fact,



motion is slightly decelerated) as they struggle to maintain serious expressions. Unable to keep them up, they burst into laughter. In its Tel Aviv debut in August 2013, the work was exhibited in close proximity to *Will You Dance for Me*. The two were installed in adjacent rooms and sound mutually penetrated the respective installations. Viewers could very clearly hear the laughter of the children while watching Yehudit Arnon vanish into the darkness, and the elegiac soundtrack of *Will You Dance for Me* provided a troubling accompaniment to the bursts of merriment rolling across the monitors of *First to Laugh*.

This is Gersht's first work to feature young children. It is also the first to employ the frontal portrait as its primary aesthetic template. Though he does make reference to Rembrandt's portraiture in *Will You Dance*, it is not dramatically used as a major underlying aesthetic paradigm there as it is here. To realize the work, the artist filmed children in a mixed-population school belonging to a Jewish-



Arab community near Jerusalem. Each pair of kids was seated directly facing each other and instructed to play the game until one or both burst into laughter.

Gersht deems it crucial that his works present real situations, as when the matador gets ready for an actual bullfight that could cost him his life in *Offering*. In conceiving *First to Laugh*, Gersht was intent on wresting authentic responses from his subjects. The genuineness of the situation and the earnest engagement of the kids are of fundamental importance. It is what makes possible the work's intense, overwhelming presence.

The children were filmed against a flat black background. The lighting lends them a painterly quality, with deeply shadowed areas contrasting against brightly lit zones of heightened expression. The figures acquire an intense actuality that gravitates toward the hyperreal. The extreme high-definition images offer an unusual abundance

of detail generally unavailable to our natural capacities of perception. Consequently hair, skin, and clothing are perceived as concretely tangible, or incontestably present.

Viewed up close, the larger-than-life portraits powerfully engage the observer's gaze, inviting long, immersive contemplation that is intermittently punctuated by laughter originating from different points along the row of monitors. The fact that the subjects of these portraits, who appear facing front, were actually looking each other in the eye is central to the experience. Gersht deployed an elaborate apparatus, involving a special forty-five-degree sheet of reflective glass, in order to achieve a completely frontal portrait without having to position the camera between the children and thus interrupt their direct eye contact. Matching the photographic hyperrealism of *First to Laugh* with an equal zeal for affective realness, the artist assigns both a pivotal role in his effort to recast, or rather

reconstitute in aesthetic experience, a moment of human life.

Whereas *Offering* explicitly displays oil on canvas, the dialogues with painting in *Will You Dance for Me* and *First to Laugh* are considerably subtler. Just as the dramatic contrast lighting on Yehudit Arnon in *Will You Dance for Me* echoes the expressively illuminated facial landscapes of Rembrandt's figures, the portraits of *First to Laugh* are highlighted so as to bring forth a hyperreality of detail characteristic of Caravaggio's paintings. The innocent sensuality of the young visages likewise calls to mind certain Caravaggesque portraits of young boys. The undeniable painterliness of Gersht's video portraits is owed in part to the slight deceleration of movement. For several seconds the portraits appear motionless. No eye blink is discernible; not even breathing is implied. In these moments, the framed monitors might be quite easily mistaken for paintings. **(10)**

According to the postmodern philosopher Gilles Deleuze, painting is a "hysterical" medium in that it "releases the presences behind representation." **(11)** Deleuze is referring to a sensory excess, independent of structured form, that painting is able to afford the viewer according to his concept of presence. "Painting gives us eyes all over," Deleuze writes, "in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs." **(12)** Is it this power that Gersht is pursuing in his videos? Whereas the moving image is concerned with time and memory at their most evasive, painting seems to re-anchor experience in matter. *First to Laugh* unites history and actuality, the timeless and the time-bound, in one intricate move. Enmeshing the history of art with the current history of political conflict, it interweaves centuries-old cultural memory with the future-oriented outlook of childhood. Although the work implicitly touches on today's political concerns and tensions, these aspects are only spelled out in the explanatory

text that accompanies the work. The images preserve a visual and sensual autonomy. Deploying a Caravaggesque sensuality, the digital video portraits irresistibly solicit our affective engagement. When the kids tense their facial muscles to maintain a serious countenance, we unconsciously do the same. When a hesitant smile emerges, cresting in laughter, we join in, whether intentionally or not. What is at stake is sheer human presence, and its capacity to solicit deep relational engagement.

For the first time in Gersht's career he turns his camera to the future, wedding the actuality of violent conflict with the promise of youth, life, and humanity. The proximity of death, so pronounced in *Will You Dance for Me*, is mitigated, if not altogether eliminated. And painting is mobilized, once again, to enhance the suggestion of "being there." In *First to Laugh*, presence prevails.

Ori Gersht does not tire of probing that unfathomable abyss where what is yet present is

simultaneously already gone, or "missing in action," to quote the artist's idiom suggestive of death on the battlefield. His works offer a complex and multifaceted aesthetic experience. Customary modes of perceiving the projected event are rejected, while new configurations call on the viewer's body to take an active part in the experience. As he unsettles the comfort of habitual moving-image viewing, Gersht forces his viewers to reconstruct their experience of space and time in the absence of easily recognizable cues for understanding the event. The experience is thus made physically concrete, bodily felt; sensory apparatuses beyond vision are mobilized in the face of perceptual uncertainty. In doing so, Gersht does not merely chase the ghosts of memory in his works; he recuperates and reincarnates them time and again.