Even following technical improvements of the daguerreotype, subjects had to sit still throughout a lengthy process. A consequence of the procedure, noted Walter Benjamin, was that it “caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure, the subject (as it were) grew into the picture.”

Guiding focus to the moment is the essence of Ori Gersht’s work contemplating and demonstrating the intricate relations between time, space, and movement as they form a concept of history. He undertakes this work in continual dialogue with kindred peers of the past and present.

The title of Falling Bird, 2008 (plate 73), a film based on a still-life painting, signals concerns with stillness and the passage of time. Birds are immediately associated with flying and thus with free movement through air, while the gerund falling denotes a vertical movement from top to bottom. The two words of the title, then, allude to an inner tension within a notion of movement: while “bird” suggests voluntary movement, “falling” indicates passive and probably involuntary movement. Moreover, the biblical connotations of the word fall remind the viewer not of Edenic freedom but of the expulsion from that haven—forever lost—into the realm of hard labor and death. Death, of course, is associated with stillness and not with movement.

Paradoxically, the pictorial source of Falling Bird is the still-life painting A Mallard Duck Hanging on a Wall with a Seville Orange, 1720–30, by the French painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (see fig. 8, p. 37). The dialectic of life and death is embedded in the genre, as reflected in its disparate naming in English and French: “still life” and “nature morte.” While both names designate stillness as a central characteristic, Gersht uses Chardin’s still life not in a photograph, the art of the stilled image, but in a film, the art of the moving image. The outcome is a dialogue between artistic media (painting and film) and between the frozen essence of the still life and the constant transition between stillness and movement as recorded in digital video. In other words, while Chardin’s art mirrors the stillness of the still life, Gersht’s art hints at its dual potential movement and stillness. Doubling and mirroring are superbly reproduced in a passage in the film in which the bird, only partly submerged, converges with its reflection (see fig. 9, pp. 39–43).

The dialogical nature of Gersht’s work has additional levels of significance. In Chardin’s painting, a mallard is seen hanging on a wall, occupying most of the pictorial space and filling its center both literally and thematically. Pierre Rosenberg, one of Chardin’s most perceptive interpreters, notes the exquisiteness of the painting’s composition: “The four bold patches of orange in the beak and feet of the duck and the granular surface of the Seville orange punctuate the composition, giving it rhythm, and make of this delightful and skillful work a masterpiece of refinement—all in nuances and half-tones. The delicacy of the browns and grays in the bird’s breast feathers, the perfect poise and marvelous balance of the design, testify to Chardin’s mastery of technique.”

In the earliest days of photography, the time required to expose film was so long that it was practically impossible to make portraits. Even following technical improvements of the daguerreotype, subjects had to sit still throughout a lengthy process. A consequence of the procedure, noted Walter Benjamin, was that it “caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure, the subject (as it were) grew into the picture.” Guiding focus to the moment is the essence of Ori Gersht’s work contemplating and demonstrating the intricate relations between time, space, and movement as they form a concept of history. He undertakes this work in continual dialogue with kindred peers of the past and present.

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1040x45]211
[894x720]MANIFEST TIME: THE ART OF ORI GERSHT
Yoav Rinon
Since movement is a seminal feature of film, its role in Gersht’s Fall-
ing Bird is not surprising. What is salient here is the fact that movement begins with the stillness of death and ends with the stillness of annihila-
tion, a progression that is a constitutive element of Gersht’s work. Even
those of Gersht’s films in which destruction is not the beginning but the end,
or in which annihilation is not described at all, represent a deterio-
rating movement of two stages of destruction. The opening represents
what is already a certain kind of destruction, and the closing is a cul-
mination of a process of worsening. Frequently, there is play within and
tween dialogical levels and their meanings, as in Big Bird (plate 68) and
Pomegranate (frontispiece), both 2006.

Rosenberg, “it is this quality above all that distinguishes Chardin’s
work as we know it, while the pomegranate is a Jewish symbol of re-
creation and reproduction.” Yet in both cases the titles also incorporate detona-
tions and connotations that are in opposition to creativity and fertility:
the Big Bang suggests detonation, while the pomegranate is linked lin-
guistically—and through its shape—to explosions (in Hebrew, the same
word is used for “pomegranate” and “grenade”). These latter allusions accrue
signifying power to the films evolve.

Each film opens with a still-life image. Big Bang presents a vase
with flowers that alludes to an eighteenth-century Dutch painting in
which a tulip is a prominent motif (fig. 14), while Pomegranate refers to a
seventeenth-century still-life by the Spanish artist Juan Sánchez Cotán
(fig. 17). In Big Bang, associations with decay and death are embedded
in the flowers, which in the still-life genre serve as a memento mori—a
reminder of the short span of life and its approaching end. These associa-
tions become even more prominent when the vase is exploded and it
shatters, its flowers shredded. In Pomegranate, the destructive element
is not initially transparent, especially since Gersht replaces the origi-
nal quince of the source painting with a pomegranate. While Sánchez
Cotán’s picture concentrates on uncutting fruits and vegetables, Gersht
focuses on the alluring pomegranate. It is only later, when a bullet bursts
the pomegranate and drops of its red juice stain the other vegetables,
that the film realizes the destructive potential of its (Hebrew) title.

Despite its drama, the explosion of an object is not the only impor-
tant theme of the two films; documentation of destruction’s aftermath
is critical too. In Big Bang, the camera lingers on the debris, following
the pendulum movement of the

The titles of the two works allude to creative forces and fertility: the
Big Bang is the creative force responsible for the emergence of the world
as we know it, while the pomegranate is a Jewish symbol of re-
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that the film realizes the destructive potential of its (Hebrew) title.
One of Friedrich’s recurring motifs that appears in all of these paintings is the Rückenfigur (“turned figure”)—a human being shown from behind. Figures with their back to the viewer are not Friedrich’s invention, for as early as the late Middle Ages one can find turned foreground figures that function as an imaginary fourth wall in the picture’s cube of space, as in the compositions by the Italian painter Giotto. Yet unlike Friedrich’s turned figures, these structuring bodies rarely serve strictly as spectators; rather, they are participants in the scene they face. And this is not the only difference, as Joseph Leo Koerner has argued:

> With the further development of landscape painting in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Rückenfigur took its place within the stock repertoire of staffage which might ornament a panorama’s foreground and determine the overall character and message of the scene. In the “view-painting” or veduta, a turned figure could establish the vista’s scale, enhancing its monumentality and marking off the whole pictorial field as something “worth seeing.” In one popular variant, the Rückenfigur is an artist who sits at the margin of the scene, sketching the landscape. Friedrich’s Rückenfiguren are perhaps closest to this conceit, although the event they dramatize is never the actual labour of making, but rather the originary act of experience itself. Appearing alone, in symmetrical pairs... or in groups contemplating a sublime view... they dominate the natural scene... defining landscape as primarily the encounter of subject with world.

The Rückenfigur features prominently in Gersht’s Evaders—and a series of photographs taken during its filming—particularly in images from the last scene of the film (plate 80) in which the protagonist’s body almost fills the frame. As a subject encountering the world, this wanderer can be interpreted as representing either Benjamin or Gersht. In the context of the Holocaust, the encounter has a unique resonance that in retrospect can be seen as foretold in Friedrich’s Chasseur in the Forest. Koerner’s remarks on this work are especially pertinent to discussion of Evaders:

> The coexistence of the foe, the artist, and the viewer in a single figure and, moreover, the positioning of this figure within the context of impending death as well as mourning for the human condition, is a precise formulation of the Benjamin figure in Evaders. Benjamin, the Jew, the designated foe of the Aryan race who tries in vain to escape the Nazis, becomes the emblem of both the human and the humane. He also symbolizes all victims of the deterioration from humanity to dehumanization, the horrific realization of which was the Nazis’ incessant, and highly successful, liquidation of the Jews of Europe. The combination of dehumanization and extermination is forcefully and magnificently encapsulated by Gersht’s Liquidation, which also constitutes a remarkable dialogue with Friedrich’s canvases.

Friedrich’s The Monk by the Sea was first presented in the annual exhibition of the Prussian Royal Academy in 1810, where it was seen by the German romantic author and dramatist Heinrich von Kleist. Kleist’s remarks on the painting, according to Werner Hofmann, “deserve the name of genius, and are among the most penetrating comments ever made about Friedrich’s art.” As Hofmann quotes Kleist:

> There can be nothing sadder or more desolate in the world than this place: the only spark of life in the broad domain of death; the lonely centre in the lonely circle. The picture, with its two or more mysterious subjects, looks like an apophasis... and since it has, in its anarchy and boundlessness, no foreground but the frame, it is as if one’s (the viewer’s) eyes...
had been cut off... Why, if the artist painted this landscape using its own chalk and its own water, I believe he would make the foxes and the wolves weep: the most powerful praise, without death, that could be given to this type of landscape painting.

Kleist’s emphasis on the sadness and desolation of Friedrich’s landscape attests to his keen perception of the emotional power of a picture “that would make the foxes and the wolves weep,” additionally, his allusion to the apocalypse calls attention to the painting’s evocation of absolute ending and total annihilation. This apocalyptic atmosphere raises the question of the position—and the role—of the human being in a desolate world. Here again the observations of Werner Hofmann are illuminating:

The stages of liquefaction and dematerialization leave only a narrow zone for man. Sea and sky are both barred to him. But where he stands compensation for his insignificance, is on the highest point of the dunes, exactly underneath the vivid chiaroscuro conflict of the scraps of cloud which—the man—are directed to the right. Furthermore, his position is given weight by the picture’s organization. It is no surprise to discover that the man in the monk’s habit divides the width of the picture exactly by the Golden section... At the same time, a contradiction is apparent. The man is lost, yet he has a dominant function. He is a well-considered caesura, stabilizing everything that is going on in the picture, and directing the viewer’s thoughts to desolation and the “domain of death.” By interrupting the “uniformity,” which ignores humankind, the vertical axis focuses attention on the oppressive weight of the place’s exposure and isolation. With this comes the impression of timelessness. Time seems to have stopped; this is an extraordinary daring thing to attempt, and it explains the forcefulness of the composition, especially the way in which the mountain ranges and the bold shapes of the individual peaks are built up.”

Friedrich’s emphasis on the sadness and desolation of death. This act of salvation by means of art, so fundamental to romantic thought, can also be detected in Friedrich’s famous Wanderer above the Sea of Fog. Here too a person stands in a natural setting, as in The Monk by the Sea, this encounter symbolizes the human capacity to face the forces of nature. In the words of Helmut Börsch-Supan, the figure has “a distinct air of finality about it; this landscape is even less conceivable without a figure than [Friedrich’s Woman before the Setting Sun, about 1822]. In this way Friedrich represents the state of eternal life and the fact that man is created in the image of God. This is an extraordinary daring thing to attempt, and it explains the forcefulness of the composition, especially the way in which the mountain ranges and the bold shapes of the individual peaks are built up.”

The centrality of the human figure in Friedrich’s compositions is echoed and evoked in Gersht’s reference to these paintings in Liquidation.

That this series of photographs is highly indebted to German romanticism in general, and to Friedrich’s paintings in particular, is beyond dispute. Some of the photographs, such as Galicia (fig. 21) and A Long Way (fig. 22), both 2005, recall Friedrich’s paintings more explicitly than others, but the series as a whole is replete with reverberations of the German romantic painter and his world of symbols. Interestingly, in Liquidation Gersht chooses not to include a human figure. Thus, while Friedrich’s romantic endeavor—as well as its implications concerning the balance between the human, the humane, and nature—is based on the inclusion of the figure in his pictures, Gersht’s achievement, while in constant and intensive dialogue with Friedrich, is based on the exclusion of the human being from the artistic frame and therefore, at least at a certain level, from the frame of reference as well. What we see in the photographs is a blur nature; the eradication of the figure attests to apocalypse as absolute annihilation, the erasure of the human and the humane. if Friedrich’s landscape in Wanderer above the Sea of Fog is inconceivable without a figure, then Gersht’s photographs should be seen as representing the inconceivable.
The notion of dehumanization is also evident in Gersht’s reference to the British painter Francis Bacon’s practice of distorting and sometimes erasing the faces of his figures with smeared paint. Bacon’s use of this technique was especially brilliant in his pictures based on Diego Velázquez’s painting of Pope Innocent X, 1650. In one example among many, Head VI, 1949 (fig. 23), half of the figure’s face is completely erased; what is left is mainly the mouth, open in a scream. The wiping of wet paint has a photographic effect, recalling the way a moving object appears blured on film. Bacon’s art was influenced by photography and, in the case of Head VI, by film as well, clarifying the connections among painting, photography, and dehumanization.14 Bacon suggested dehumanization by other means as well, making references to the nurse’s inaudible scream in Eisenstein’s silent film The Battleship Potemkin and to the electric chair.

In his photographs in the Liquidation series, Gersht echoes Bacon’s obscuring of imagery by overexposing the film to light. Difficult to perceive clearly, the landscapes seem to represent the turbulent inner perception of the photographer rather than details of the external world. Dissolving the image, then, replaces the objective and cool perspective of the camera—a device that usually documents the present and presence in front of its lens—with the subjective and emotionally inflected view of a human being imposing his personal perspective, imbued with echoes from the horrendous past, on the still and silent present. Gersht most forcefully applies this technique to the description of houses—as in Trace 01 (plate 29) and Trace 04 (fig. 24), both 2005—structures fabricated by human beings to provide shelter from the afflictions of nature. His distortion highlights the fact that these houses sheltered Jews neither from the horrendous effects of the weather nor, worse still, from the persecution and abuse of the Nazis, but shut them out. The houses are witnesses to the dehumanization of their occupants.

The last painter to consider in the context of Gersht’s application and transformation of sources is J. M. W. Turner, but in preparation. Kleist’s observations on Friedrich’s painting The Monk by the Sea are again worth quoting. According to Kleist, this picture has, “in its uniformity and boundlessness, no foreground but the frame, it is as if one’s..."
Another contradiction lies in the vertical layering of the spatial planes, which are not held together by the sense of depth that axial perspective would give. There is no foreground to stop our gaze travelling directly into the picture, yet it immediately hits a barrier. This is what Kleist meant when he wrote of the viewer’s eyelids having been cut off. . . . The meticulously detailed reproduction of the real world could not be more true to life, yet the paradoxical outcome is not to feel at home here but to feel distanced — alienated — from a place which is simultaneously in this world and beyond it.

Kleist’s image of “the viewer’s eyelids having been cut off,” aligning power, violence, and originality, is strikingly graphic, and it is hardly surprising that it caught the attention of the art historian. However, Hoffman’s interpretation, which accentuates the painting technique in unpacking this image, somewhat softens its violence. The dreamlike atmosphere is no doubt pertinent to Friedrich’s painting, but there is another layer of signification, one that closely links romanticism in general, and German romanticism in particular, with the visual seduction of violence and horror. This is the notion of the sublime, which the German philosopher Immanuel Kant developed in his Critique of Judgment (1790) and the German poet Friedrich Schiller analyzed in his highly influential essay “On the Sublime” (1802), which Friedrich likely knew. The sublime is a single emotion compounded of two contradictory sensations — terror and delight. Kant and Schiller took the notion from the philosopher Edmund Burke, who very likely also directly inspired Turner, whose work thereby becomes germane to our understanding of Gersht’s Liquidation.

What was merely a simile for Kleist is fully realized in one of Turner’s best-known works: Regulus, 1828/37 (fig. 26), ingeniously evoked in two of Gersht’s photographs in Liquidation. Regulus alludes to the Roman commander Marcus Atilius Regulus during the Second Punic War (218–201 B.C.E.). Taken prisoner by the Carthaginians, the general was sent on parole to Rome in order to try to persuade the Romans to sign a peace treaty. On reaching Rome, however, he defiantly advised the Romans not to surrender to the Carthaginians’ demands. The painting portrays Regulus’s departure from Rome to return to Carthage, where he would have his eyelids removed and be tortured to death. The context of the narrative’s future is implicit in the motif of the glowing sun in Turner’s oil, and influences the viewer’s position vis-à-vis the painting: when we contemplate it, we are reminded of Regulus’s experience, shorn of his sheltering eyelids and blinded by exposure to light. The sun’s capacity to deprive one of sight is considered, according to Turner’s interpreter Andrew Wilton, its “most sublime attribute.” Since the blazing sun is a preferred motif in Turner’s paintings and, moreover, since this motif was reused and reinterpreted by leading painters who were influenced directly by Turner, such as James McNeill Whistler and Claude Monet, Gersht’s use of the motif in Liquidation should also be interpreted in this specific painterly context.

There is a diptych in Liquidation that particularly recalls Turner’s sun metaphor: in Parallel I and Parallel II (figs. 26 and 27, both 2005), Gersht has overexposed the film, essentially blinding the camera by directing its lens straight at the sun. The image, however, is equivocal. On the one hand, the sun is central to the photographs, both visually and thematically; it absorbs its viewers and, resembling an eye, it returns their gaze as they observe a landscape devoid of human beings. On the other hand, the sun is not so dazzling that it cannot be safely viewed. This dimming effect, linked both to the great beauty of the photographs and to their subtle dialogue with the notion of the sublime, is crucial to our understanding of the diptych. If the sublime is closely linked to terror, then these photographs seem, at least at first sight, to have noth-
Greetings from the Angelus

Evaders, both homage to a rock. The audio and visual texts are intimately related, not only to our senses. In doing this, Ori Gersht's art is not only human but also a powerful expression of the humane. For Benjamin, Klee's angel is in constant motion due to a storm “blowing from Paradise.” And yet this movement is not only involuntary (the storm “has got caught” in the angel’s wings) but also against the angel’s will. “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” but the storm is too strong, and he is therefore cast onward, against his will. The intricate relations of time and space are notable in this concept of history: the angel moves forward, toward the future, but his face is turned backward toward the past. In other words, the angel is blind to what lies ahead of him while constantly contemplating what has already passed—unaware of the future, able to see only the past. Time and space are also related in Benjamin’s description of the storm. It is crucial that this tempest “is blowing from Paradise,” for the fall from this haven of eternal and incessant bliss to a place of accumulating wreck and debris is both “one single catastrophe,” that is to say, a single occurrence on the axis of time, and “progress,” constant movement on this same axis.

By establishing an explicit dialogue with both Benjamin and Klee, Gersht utilizes all the above texts and contexts to realize his own conception of movement, time, place, and history. Evaders, both homage to Benjamin and a reinterpretation of his “concept of history,” can thus be regarded as another of Gersht’s creative efforts to direct his viewers “gaze not only to the Holocaust—the catastrophe of history that triggered Benjamin’s death—but also to the metaphysical aspects of Gersht’s own art and to the ways photography and film can engage these dimensions of human existence that we cannot grasp directly with our senses. In doing this, Ori Gersht’s art is not only human but also a powerful expression of the humane.

My wing is ready for flight, I would like to turn back.
If stopped ever so long, I’d still have little luck.

Come away scrawling, "Gouaches from the Angels!"

There is a picture by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and Haiti on Haiti at his feet. The angel would like to stop, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm. It is crucial that this tempest—"is blowing from Paradise," for the fall from this haven of eternal and incessant bliss to a place of accumulating wreck and debris is both "one single catastrophe," that is to say, a single occurrence on the axis of time, and "progress," constant movement on this same axis.

Four points are central to discussion of Gersht’s work: movement, time, space, and their combination in the concept of history. Whether Klee’s drawing actually represents the angel in movement is not so clear; what is beyond any doubt, however, is the centrality of movement to Benjamin’s interpretation of the work. For Benjamin, Klee’s angel is in constant motion due to a storm "blowing from Paradise." And yet this movement is not only involuntary (the storm “has got caught” in the angel’s wings) but also against the angel’s will. “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.” As for time, its presence is evident in Benjamin’s commentary on the drawing: the angel’s face “is turned toward the past” while the storm “drives him irresistibly into the future.” Space is also essential for Benjamin’s reading of the drawing; for the route along which the angel is moving unravels the simplistic idea of a chain of events appearing before us, he sees one single catastrophe), he is powerless to act. “The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” but the storm is too strong, and he is therefore cast onward, against his will. The intricate relations of time and space are notable in this concept of history: the angel moves forward, toward the future, but his face is turned backward toward the past. In other words, the angel is blind to what lies ahead of him while constantly contemplating what has already passed—unaware of the future, able to see only the past. Time and space are also related in Benjamin’s description of the storm. It is crucial that this tempest—"is blowing from Paradise," for the fall from this haven of eternal and incessant bliss to a place of accumulating wreck and debris is both "one single catastrophe," that is to say, a single occurrence on the axis of time, and "progress," constant movement on this same axis.

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The pomegranate is one of the seven agricultural species with which the land of Israel was blessed: “For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths which spring out of valleys and hills, a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and of balm, and of honey” (Deuteronomy 8:8–10).

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6 The useful concept of “foreground” was coined by Nina Schneider in her book Narrative Frames: Reading and Authorship (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001). “Foreground” are a “metaphor for sites of textual entry” that serve as “openings into textual intersubjectivity” (11–12).

7 Joseph Leo Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 212.

8 Ibid., 215.


10 In Scholem’s poem, which appears as the epigraph to ,page 10 (and was composed for Benjamin’s twenty-sixth birthday, July 4, 1921), the angel is about to move.