

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Life Stories*: Maayan Amir & Ruti Sela, Meiro Kozumi, Tova Mozard
Curated by Chen Tamir

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Life Stories

by Chen Tamir

We form our identities in reaction to each other (to received cultures, inherited histories, social economies). We demonstrate ourselves to each other, every day and every minute. We aspire to become images. With this in mind, the artists in *Life Stories* use their cameras like microscopes, inspecting and experimenting with their subjects. Common people in extraordinary situations are put under their lenses.

The unblinking eye of the camera is relentless, and, somehow, gives the artists license to probe their subjects. Amir and Sela, Mozard, and Koizumi examine what it means to listen to and watch other people, and also what it means to frame and control them while giving them a platform and a voice. The supposedly simple, neutral act of documenting people speaking about themselves becomes, in these works, a loaded exercise in power dynamics. The result is a complex web of interactions between the subject, the artist, and the viewer, who ultimately passes judgment on them.

In *Beyond Guilt*, a video trilogy, Maayan Amir and Ruti Sela record the seedy underworld of Tel Aviv's nightclubs, its perverts, and its sex workers. Rather than simply documenting their surroundings, Amir and Sela provoke their subjects. In the first part of the trilogy, the artists cram themselves into nightclub bathrooms and lure in groups of various young men; they also chat with lesbian soldiers and with a promiscuous, braces-clad teenager. The subjects have what seem like banal conversations about sex, but coursing through their dialogues are hints that military experience and blatant racism have become so ingrained in their world views that they have actually influenced their sexuality. A lesbian army commander, who surely must navigate discrimination against her own sexuality and gender, nonetheless mimics the chauvinism encouraged in the army. She starts with simple machismo, demonstrating how she struts her hat low over her eyes when she wants to seem tough to her soldiers, and graduates to unrepentant racism, calling Arabs "sons of bitches" who "don't have a country." She takes a drag off



Maayan Amir and Ruti Sela, video still from *Beyond Guilt*, 2003–2005



Maayan Amir and Ruti Sela, video still from *Beyond Guilt*, 2003–2005

her cigarette with her arm slung over the shoulders of a young woman. When she kisses her for the camera, the woman complains, “you’re struggling with me,” as if even love were something you have to prove.

The intertwining of sex with fighting is even more evident in the second part of the trilogy. Here, Amir and Sela invite to a hotel room various men in their 30s and 40s whom they’ve met in online chat rooms. Less guarded than the subjects in the nightclub restrooms, these men display a penchant for sadomasochistic play while answering questions about their past service in the military. One man keeps his handcuffs in a standard army-issued toiletry bag. Like the lesbian soldier, he too demonstrates his tough commander voice, reveling in the authority and sense of entitlement it confers, noting that this kind of army job is best for “doms” (dominant S&M players). He then jumps up and down on the bed with another man, clad in peculiar underwear, making it obvious that his sense of authority is completely self-issued. Another man, an aspiring porn star, proudly refers to his penis as his “weapon” when asked about the army. The same man confesses to robbing Arabs during a routine inspection. This piece, though graphic, is not shocking for its pornographic content, but rather for its naked portrayal of the human condition.

The last part of *Beyond Guilt* sees a shift in Amir and Sela’s power relations with their subjects. They invite a prostitute in her 40s to their room and hand her the camera as they ask about her profession. They ask her to direct them and make them look good for the camera, posing in kittenish ways with feathery props. This part of the trilogy is very different from the previous two, as it depicts Amir and Sela as vulnerable characters rather than putting them in the position of power, behind the camera. In this section, the

artists are the subjects; the prostitute acts as a sort of joint alter-ego. In her profession, sexuality is a performance. Amir and Sela investigate the power dynamics involved in sex, noting that passivity can be a way of gaining power, especially for women, in a world dominated by violence. They ask the prostitute what her impressions of them are, how their bodies might be described, or how they differ. Their questions emphasize their status as subjects – they are on the side of the camera where they can be judged. The end of the video shows the three of them jumping on a bed (echoing the scene of the S&M men in the previous episode); the women are wearing wigs, masks, and bunny ears, and playing themselves up for the camera like teenage girls. Of all their participants, the prostitute is the only one whose face is never revealed. She is protected, while Amir and Sela are exposed.

Each of Amir and Sela’s subjects performs directly for the camera. These young people came of age with video—it is the medium of their generation—and they position themselves and tailor their performances accordingly. This kind of pandering to the camera is starkly contrasted in *Leona Babette*, a work by Tova Mozard. Babette is an aging lounge singer and B-movie actress with a firecracker personality. She is filmed in her anachronistic red 1970s living room. She wears a big, blond wig and a tiny, black dress from which her ample, dimply flesh squeezes out. If she weren’t so personable, Babette would be a complete caricature. She belts out show tunes and jazzy ditties with a strident voice. Despite being a Hollywood professional, she is childishly unselfconscious, as evinced by a seven-minute-long monologue that catalogues and showcases her talents. She has amplified her charms to the point of being grotesque, but Babette’s persona is based on mimicry. She doesn’t sing her own songs; she



Tova Mozard, video still from *Leona Babette*, 2002



Tova Mozard, video still from *Wall of Love*, 2005

sings popular songs by famous performers and emulates their style. Like the prostitute in *Beyond Guilt*, she is a professional who sells herself by donning a façade. She explains that she creates her persona based on who she thinks people want her to be—she exists as a performance, not a person. This quality is brought glaringly to light when Babette occasionally addresses Mozard, who remains silent behind the camera. We're not used to seeing this from a subject; it is jarring. When she breaks the spell of the camera and says to Mozard, "You're so quiet! Why don't you say something?" she implicates us, the audience, at the same time. She confronts our voyeurism as she discusses her own exhibitionism, and the camera is what lies between.

Blatant voyeurism sustains our attention throughout Mozard's other video work, *Wall of Love*. The subject in this piece is an Animist who identifies as objectum-sexual, and thus is sexually and emotionally attracted to objects. Eija-Riitta Eklöf Berliner-Mauer fell in love with and married the Berlin Wall, and unapologetically explains her pain since its demise in 1989. The video opens with her saying, "Feelings are always hard to explain, but I will try." Like Babette, Mrs. Berliner-Mauer addresses a viewer she knows is watching. Also like Babette, she is filmed in her own living room, typing on her computer and playing with her many cats, so the viewer is given an intimate vantage-point, as if we are guests sitting on her couch. This makes Mozard's approach seem softer and less antagonistic than that of the other artists. She doesn't ask her subjects to reveal intimate details or follow instructions, but simply lets the camera roll, handing over responsibility to her subjects—or so would seem. In fact, Mozard's off-camera presence is felt throughout the work, not just by her aesthetic choices or her editing, but by the

conversations these women conduct and their sense of intimacy. Mozard is invisible but we know she is there, and this reminds us that the camera is there. Mozard's minimal intervention in these character portraits actually elucidates the provocation of the presence of the camera.

The loneliness plaguing Babette and Mrs. Berliner-Mauer, as well as the men and women looking for love in the wrong places in *Beyond Guilt*, is punctuated by the protagonist in Meiro Koizumi's *Human Opera XXX*. For this work, Koizumi put out a newspaper call seeking people who would discuss their true personal tragedies for a fee. The video opens with Koizumi, his face painted silver, setting up a dark studio cluttered with things. Shiny, crinkled paper hangs in the background. There is an LED dial similar to radar equipment circling in the corner. Koizumi hangs a dim blue light over the scene and tests the audio by scattling. Once the set, which seems not much different from before, is ready, the subject takes a seat towards the side and hunches into the light. Koizumi asks him banal questions to test the audio and put him at ease. This first part, although mundane, points the viewer to the accoutrements of video documentation and to the importance of these seemingly meaningless props.

As the man tells his story of alcoholism, divorce, and the loss of his daughter, Koizumi continually interrupts him, claiming that he's trying to improve the formal composition of the frame. He claims to be adding "drama" or "beauty" by including preposterous props and performing silly actions such as wagging a stick or face-painting. Despite the ridiculous props and degrading instructions Koizumi demands, the man persists with his story, even mumbling it after Koizumi has stuffed a long roll of bread into his mouth. The video ends with the man posed quietly and



Meiro Koizumi, video still from *Human Opera XXX*, 2007
Image courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery



Meiro Koizumi, video still from *Human Opera XXX*, 2007
Image courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery

completely still, drool dripping from the bread in his mouth, while Koizumi stands behind the back wall, his silver face popping out through a hole, moaning loudly through a long tube.

We are not told how much the man in *Human Opera XXX* was compensated for his troubles, but surely he did not endure such humiliation for money alone. His perseverance is a testament to the human drive to obey instructions, but, more importantly, to the drive to purge oneself of one's secrets and stories, as if in confession. Babette, Mrs. Berliner-Mauer, and the people in *Beyond Guilt* display

the same drive. Where does this leave the viewer? This has been done for us: the subject can't exist unless we do. Thus, we are implicated in the power relations at play in these videos, and are partly responsible for the choices made by the artists and the subjects. Amir and Sela, Mozard, and Koizumi set up "stress tests" to probe what it means to participate in such scenarios, and what the viewer wants of the artists and the subjects. What does it mean to make art about a real person, and what does it mean to view it? What kind of strange power does the camera have that it allows these relationships to form in the first place?

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Maayan Amir (b. 1978) and Ruti Sela (b. 1974) are based in Tel Aviv, Israel. Their collaborative video projects have been shown throughout Israel and internationally at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies (New York), Storefront for Art and Architecture (New York), Pompidou Center (Paris), Sydney Biennial, Art in General (New York), and the House of World Cultures (Berlin) among others.

Tova Mozard (b. 1978) is based in Sweden. Working in photography and video, she has shown widely throughout Scandinavia in venues such as Moderna Museet (Stockholm) Malmö Konstmuseum, the CC7 Biennial (Stockholm), Fotogalleriet (Oslo) and internationally at venues such as Vox Populi (Philadelphia), Galerie Opdhal (Berlin), Múcsarnok Kunstahalle (Budapest), and SMAK (Ghent). She holds an M.F.A. from the Malmö Art Academy and was a visiting scholar the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture. Mozard is represented by APL/Peter Bergman Gallery.

Meiro Koizumi (b. 1976) is based in Japan. His artwork and films have been presented at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau (Amsterdam), Tate Modern (London), Extra City (Antwerp), La Casa Encendida (Madrid), and Govett Brewster Art Gallery (New Zealand). He won the 2001 Beck's Future Student Film and Video award. Koizumi is represented by Dicksmith Gallery and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Chen Tamir is a curator and art critic dividing her time between Toronto, New York, and Tel Aviv. She holds an M.A. in Curatorial Studies from Bard College, a B.F.A. in Visual Art and a B.A. in Anthropology from York University. She is also a curator at Flux Factory, an artist-run center in Queens, New York. Her writing has appeared in several publications.

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