



Siting Language

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SITING LANGUAGE

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The following words and images form part of my research project entitled *Sites of Unlearning: Encountering Perforated Ground* undertaken at the Slade School of Fine Art. In this essay I revisit sites in Israel and Palestine, where I have been photographing for the past four years. My encounters with these sites include the visits to the sites with a camera, a visit informed by the political and historical narratives and the performative act of photography, and revisits to the sites through the printing process and their belated reflections offered in words. My works seek to *perforate*: in the literal sense, I aim to pierce through the multiple layers held tightly in the photographic image and its making, and metaphorically, to perforate an already perforated ground found in the landscape and language.

My approach to writing emerged from a practice of making. Through the medium of photography, I use the negative as the ground for experimentation with *edges of sights and sites*. Methods used in the printing process, such as the stretching of what can be made visible on paper, is used to stretch the various meanings offered by words and their repeated translation into other languages. Here, misunderstanding and misreading of both images and words aim to offer generative ways of seeing.



⌘ to x (aleph), gelatin silver print, 2017

Urgency

דחיפות

דחפ

urge, compulsion, impulse, desire

استعجل

pressing, compelling

Dringlichkeit

drängen

ungeduldig schieben und drücken

or impatiently push and press



Split Road, lambda c-print, 2016



שרטוט, gelatin silver print, 2016

In the pages that follow, words and images are driven by compulsion. Urge, impulse and desire are urgently and equally gathered to the task of writing; the task of making with words and images, pushing and pressing against each other to leave an imprint. The play with translation paves the way through the urgency for this making process, the desire for another form of seeing, the impulse to make and to encounter, and, finally, to consider what is impatiently pushing and pressing in the photographic trace and the printing process.

My essay asks to be imagined as the forked paths and detours offered by languages and sites alike. One might imagine sketching a map of this essay as the act of redrawing circles. Or, an analogy might be an apparatus that can draw a perfect circle time and again, in an endless movement of a needle or a pencil: I anticipate the exhaustion of the paper, or any other surface for that matter. I patiently wait for an injury that will pierce through the worn-out surface. This will provide the necessary outcome in the form of a hole

caused by a repeated (violent) action of drawing, but will falsely promise a conclusion in the form of rupture, which might lead, mistakenly, to a sense of relief, a solution, an answer, or even worse, an outcome.



שרטוט, gelatin silver print, 2016

In another analogy for this text, the circle is drawn by hand, passively retracing the shadow-line of a circle over and over again, actively re-marking a circle that only follows the guideline made by the previous marks of retracing. In this way, the circle is never a perfect circle, it is guided by the shaky hand, the force and attention invested in the movement, the weight of the pencil, the uneven surface, and possibly even the resistance of the fibres of the paper.



שרטוט, gelatin silver print, 2017

In the final analogy for this essay, the gesture of drawing becomes an action of piercing: that of sewing through layers. The hand holding the needle pierces through each layer at a time in a repetitive movement, slowly fastening them together. With each complete gesture of piercing, the bond between the layers becomes stronger, tighter. The resulting seam perforates the edges of the layers, whilst trying to keep them held together. To return to the written text, it might be that we end up with a book, which brings us all the way back to the beginning, the site of the inherent conflict, the inability to escape the predetermined linearity that is the domain of the author. I would like to focus on the possibility of threading and unthreading, the act of perforating, and the act of holding together.



Crash Site no. 1,2,3, photo etching, 2014

What is threading and unthreading in language? I began thinking of *siting language* as a practice that draws its methodology from the making process of images. The misspelling of the word *sightseeing* has been a major factor in developing my methods of thinking and making. Even when writing this word just now, I had to return to the dictionary to double-check my spelling, remembering there was a mistake, but not recalling which was the correct one. I try to remember the spelling by means of negation, that it is not *seeing site* as I understand it, and that it is the *sights*, which the dictionary tells me is ‘the faculty or power of seeing,’ ‘the act or fact of seeing,’ or what ‘can be seen’ that one desires to see.¹ The double use of seeing in sightseeing causes me to consider what *governs* seeing, what could be seen or what one actually seeks to see when visiting sites.

¹ The New Oxford Dictionary of English, ed. Judy Pearsall and others. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), s.v. “sight.”



Crater, c-print, 2016

Sightseeing points towards a crisis of seeing, where seeing is governed by prior sights, knowledge and desires. What lies in the desire to see sights? I would like to imagine this act as a desire to *see again* or simply to see with one's own eyes. But there is also a disturbing translation hiding beneath these words, and that is in the notion of seeing the sight through what has already been framed as the *sight* of the site. In other words, it is what has already been framed by those governing the site: the nature reserve, the owner of the land, those guiding the way through the landscape, or even the visitors themselves, who search the site for the best views they have seen in prior images. In practice and on the ground I refer here to the placement of a viewpoint, that spot that often gives the visitors the *best* view, an overview of the site and probably some historical information on a *need-to-know* basis, as if framed in a postcard. Even in the desert for example, rocks will be marked with different painted stripes of colour to mark the path, even when the valley only flows in one direction and there are no forked paths to choose from.



Amud, c-print, 2015

The path is already mapped for various reasons of safety or simply for reasons of convenience, promising *the most scenic* route. To lose one's path is not an easy task, neither is the decision to go off track.

It is not my intention here to undermine the work of nature reserve bodies, or protest against actions of preserving and mapping nature. Rather, I want to focus on the propositions offered by misspelling words and the way that desire can unfold into ways of seeing or encountering sites and sights. Every time I write the word, I return to this conversation in my mind, not to find a resolution other than by correctly spelling the word, but rather to rethink or reconsider what I wish to see and whether I can see beyond these wishes. This place that I have just marked out in words is where this text begins.



Mount X, laser engraved wood print in CMYK, 2015



Mount X, laser engraved wood plates, 2015

Mount X is the name I gave to the project on the site that had failed to be settled throughout history. My works made in response to this site include hybrid and photographic prints. Using four CMYK laser engraved panels I developed a hybrid printing technique to explore the notion of colour as a trace. The process aims to *exhaust* the image by stretching the process through the different printing methods (analogue and digital). Each print is made of the four panels layered on a single sheet of paper, causing the image to appear in a changing monochromatic tone.

The process draws on many different printing processes such as photography (digital and analogue) screen-printing, laser-cut, relief print and, lastly, printed by hand via the application of pressure with a wooden spoon. Every single failure left marks on the print, from the negative to the digital scan, the mechanical marks, the order of panels, inking, registering, environmental influences, impatience and hand signatures all appear on the final prints. The colours emerge here through the process that began with a single image taken in black and white. The prints vary due to the ink building up on the wooden plates; the changing order of print in cyan, magenta and yellow, and the marks made by the manual process. Although, theoretically, the colours should have overlaid each other to make a monochrome image, the colour emerged through the failures of the process where the lines fail to overlay, the ink weakened, and the human hand left its mark.

In *Mount X*, the X stands for the intersection of the roads, of the site and the name, of the image and the word. The X letter, which could mean an intersection, gesture of erasure, the unknown or absent figure, or even a marker of a desired destination, also resembles the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet – א.

At this site I encountered remnants of a Ma'abara – a transit camp – as I made my way to visit my paternal grandparents with the intention of hearing them tell the story of their immigration from Kurdistan to Israel and the reasons for changing our family name.



Mount X, c-print, 2017

On December 2014, I drove with my father to visit my grandparents, who live in the north of Israel. On our way we passed by their village intentionally, a deliberate and mutual decision to stall our visit. My father pointed at a hill in front of us, a nostalgic move on his behalf, and said that he and his friends called it 'Mount of love' (I chose not to ask further). He continued with a brief history of the place, the hill was called after some king... I lost him when I noticed the mount is covered with platforms made of concrete. While contemplating the narratives told to me by my father, I walked towards the concrete platforms and measured eleven steps on the long side of one of them. I noticed that they also had a single lower concrete step placed in the centre; what might have been the entrance to a temporary structure that once occupied the platform. A process of identification began forming in my mind; the first thoughts suspected the erasure of a Palestinian village or the remains of a dislocated military base, but these were immediately rejected due to the location. To my astonishment my father didn't know either. He, who grew up in the near settlement, who gave it a name, and who knows the country and its tales by heart didn't know that these were the remains of a 'Ma'abara' – in Hebrew, a passage way, a temporary camp for Jewish immigrants from Arab countries.

Moments later, my Grandfather proudly tells the story of his Aliya (a Hebrew word that means ascent, rise, and the 'return' of the Jews to Israel), how he made his way as an illegal immigrant [said with a smile] from Kurdistan, through Syria, and why he changed his name much later because he had an identical double in the village who kept receiving his pay cheques each month. The name change, he claims still, was to prevent confusion of identities. My repeated question as to why he didn't choose a Kurdish name was dismissed and conveniently forgotten.

Reflecting on the stories I heard that day, I sketched a few notes on the action of name changing. People who came to Israel like my Grandparents received their family names upon registering in Israel by a random official asking questions of origin. In some cases, traces of misspelling or mistranslation into the Hebrew language appear in the newly given name. The name was given according to stories people brought with them such as

nicknames, or after the place they came from. Here, name and site merge, for example. For my grandfather, who still claims in front of strangers he was born in Israel, in the hope to be considered a ‘Sabra’ (the Hebrew term **צבר**, which means prickly pear cactus and a native Israeli), changing a name is inherently blurring and wishing to forget the past and place of origin by inventing or *bending* the details. In the many times I heard him tell the story, the details are always slightly misregistered: arriving on a donkey sometimes changes to arriving in a brand new cab, the tent that becomes their first home in Israel, which was then Mandatory Palestine, is sometimes also a shed. Dates have little importance, which is why I am still unclear as to when exactly my grandparents arrived in Israel and how old they were.

Two significant notes were made from this visit: the first drawn by the inability of my father to see and recognize the remains of the Ma’abara – demonstrating ways in which shame and broken narratives manifest in blindness and erasure. The second observation came much later, when sharing this story with friends in Israel, which revealed similar narratives and actions that resulted in name-change, undertaken by Jews who immigrated from Arab countries to Israel – also called Mizrahim, like my grandfather. To change one’s name is the rejection or abandonment of a given gift, a confrontation with the inherited past that is given with the name. ‘To inherit,’ writes Jacques Derrida, ‘means both to give the name and to receive it. [Naming] risks to bind, to enslave or to engage the other, to link the called, to call him/her to respond even before any decision or any deliberation, even before any freedom. An assigned passion, a prescribed alliance as much as a promise.’² According to Derrida the name already demands a response, the gift of the name, of heritage, can bind the one who gives and the one who receives.

² Jacques Derrida, *On The Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood and others. (California: Stanford University, 1995), 82.



Mount X, gelatin silver print, 2015

Reflecting upon actions of name-change and its relation to a given identity, I ask in my work what is being requested and promised with a name or the act of naming and what is being refused? What marks are left when attempting to be emancipated from one name or identity while requesting to assume another? What happens to the bond between the one who gives and the one who receives when the name is created by migration, translation or misspelling? These questions are relevant for the process of unlearning that my practice seeks to encourage, which is inherently concerned with how the past is seen in the present, how it contaminates seeing, and how it shapes future desires to see. Most importantly, I am interested in the traces left by acts of erasure, be it the name or the place and what is *bound* by these actions. The visits to Mount X are shaped by the desire to find out about my Kurdish heritage; a heritage that struggles with its identity in Israeli society. Feelings of cultural shame and desires to reconstruct a new identity, result in erasure and the inability to see.



Mount X, c-print, 2015

While my grandfather tells me the story of his immigration to Israel, I came across a photograph in the family album, which is actually a plastic bag filled with random photographs in colour and in black and white. I pulled out a photograph of my grandfather sitting at a table next to four other men with an awkwardly cut paper patch stuck on the photograph itself, concealing one man's face and upper body – his identity manually erased from memory and stored in a plastic bag.

My efforts to understand or uncover my identity, yields many undocumented stories and incredibly awkward attempts to forget. These stories do not directly appear in my works nor will I insist on forcing them into an exhibition space. They do however filter in, influence and motivate my making process, my treatment of the photographic trace, the printing process and the visits to sites. The interest in the changing of names that led to the project of Mount X, appears once more in the following site.



Trees (west, east), c-print, 2015



Trees (south, north), c-print, 2017

فسايل وفسايل

פצאל ופסאיל

Peza'el and Fasa'il

In the Arab village of Fasa'il and the Jewish settlement of Peza'el the doubling begins in the spoken and written name. Road signs in Israel are written in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. In Arabic Fasa'il and Peza'el are identical, while English offers various options. The written word kept changing in my text, until deciding to return to the road sign version Peza'el. In speaking the English word as if it was German, and translating it back into Hebrew, Peza'el would be pronounced as Petza'el. In Hebrew, peza means wound, and el means god.



Peza'el, c-print, 2015

My visits to the Jordan Valley began out of the need to *see*: to retrace with my own eyes and by walking the lines of the occupied territories of the West Bank; where it borders with Jordan and mostly, to experience and encounter the complexity of these border lines. These lines, which are at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are for many Israelis a merely imaginary vision of perforated ground.

As I drive from Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea on my way to the West Bank, the car's navigation system alerts me not to use it. It is quite an odd thing to encounter a machine that admits to its shortcomings and inaccuracy. Nonetheless, this is a political matter, attesting to the instability of borders and access to the area. I translate here the alert as it appeared on my screen on the morning of one of my visits to the West Bank:

Drive Safely.

To prevent entering dangerous areas in ישי״ (Yesha), we advise you to refrain from using the navigation system at your disposal in ישי״ areas. You are advised to ensure that the roads listed in your destination calculation settings do not include the following options “Yebuda and Shomron” [Judea and Samaria], “Permit Required” and “Special Road”... In any case, this navigation programme should not be used whilst driving, and one should not rely merely on the information provided here, but rather, use it for guidance only, in addition to traffic regulations, road signs, the state of the road and its condition in reality, and common sense.



Zeichen, gelatin silver print, 2017

With this message in mind, I think of what a *special road* and *common sense* might be? I assume the intention was for restricted roads and the latter, to mean *common sense* for a Hebrew reader? An Israeli Hebrew reader? Or possibly, one who spent his life in the Israeli education system? This most likely could not be answered in simple terms, but the fractures begin to show in the common sense of *we*, and in *we all know what this means*, or dangerous phrases such as *no need to state the obvious*. *Special Road* is an interesting choice of words. It attests here to roads that are inaccessible to civilians, or worse, some civilians over others. Therefore, under the word *special* we actually can begin to see the regimes' concealment of state violence. I choose to look at the term metaphorically, as I search for signs of erasure and signs of blurred borders – special signs that could pierce through this silent layer of violence seen in the landscape.

My photographic interest in the Jordan Valley, the West Bank, began in 2013 with the visit to what I call in my work the *Hollow Mountain*. An encounter with an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) officer and a young man from the Palestinian village made it violently clear

to me that I am trapped between gazes, that my presence there is always watched, and that, in this way, I am always performing to an invisible audience. It explained the cars I have seen slowing down to check on my suspicious activity, cars that do not always stop to inquire for my identity or intentions, just observing and recording.

Hollow Mountain הר חלול, has not yet developed into a work. However, it exists as a narrative, perhaps waiting to be written as a text work. It informs my thinking process with the proposition of a hollow gaze. I first visited this place in April 2013. Climbing the mountain by foot in search for a viewpoint. The mountain revealed itself as punctured from all sides. Observation posts, tunnels, and remnants of military presence littered the place. It looked abandoned, ruins of past wars. The direction of the tunnels indicated the direction of the surveying and watchful gaze. They pointed at the border with Jordan. Shortly after my arrival, a military vehicle appeared and an IDF officer stepped out to observe the Palestinian village beneath the mountain. The remnants of the observation posts, and the binoculars of the officer are pointing at opposite directions. He was looking inwards, towards the West Bank. I was standing there too with my camera and tripod, observing him observing the landscape. He wasn't bothered by my presence, and like the clocking of an observer's assignment he remained there briefly and drove off. In the background were sounds of barking dogs, drawing closer and closer until a young man appeared accompanied by two dogs. I paused and waited, concerned by what might follow. I smiled as he approached despite the fear that overwhelmed me. We didn't have a shared language, but it was clear what needed to be said. I waved and smiled and he did the same. He came closer, and I offered him to view the landscape from the viewfinder of my camera. The camera stood for my words. More than words, it offered to show how I saw what he was observing from a distance. In the attempt to break apart the different directions of the gaze; to make it hollow again. He escorted me down to my car – out of hospitality.



חלול, photo etching, 2013

I returned from this visit with images of the observation post, the military vehicle approaching and departing the scene, and a video of a tree entirely covered by spider webs, which I thought was remarkably unusual to the area. However, that is *not yet* the work I named *Hollow Mountain*. Currently a single print entitled חלול – ‘hollow’ in Hebrew – was made into a photo etching and with it my fascination with the process emerged. It depicts a line on a rock, as if cutting through it. I wanted to emphasise the gap, the *hollow ground* I saw opening beneath my feet when standing on the mountain and observing the many different historical and contemporary observation posts. Pointing at different destinations, they bear witness to Israel’s various wars with its neighbours and to the inversion of the gaze inwards, a conflict within, or perhaps, Israel’s war with itself, if the metaphor can stretch that far.



Holes, gelatin silver print, 2014

The photo etching process reduced the photographic details of the image and transformed the grains into tiny holes, slits, or punctures on the surface of the copper plate. What was a line in the photograph is now a cut, metaphorically cutting open the ground, the image, and the gaze. In search of a title for the print, I returned to this mountain, and the search for its name, while falsely remembering its location. During my visits I frequently leave the main road into dead ends, *special roads*, and *bad roads*, which makes me often lose sight of a concrete and clear map of the area. This is not simply down to a fuzzy feeling of disorientation. A map of the region, of *ישיע*, is not a map I have clearly visible in my mind's eye. Even though I grew up in Israel and have extensively traveled in the country, this area is filled with blind spots, unmarked roads, and restricted areas. In this state of losing both sight and site, my eyes landed on the double naming of the village of Fasa'il and the illegal settlement of Peza'el; the place in which, I assumed at the time, I was standing. This mistake in identification was revealed and corrected. But the interest in the double names, which I was so eager to believe was the right location remained and led to future visits and encounters.