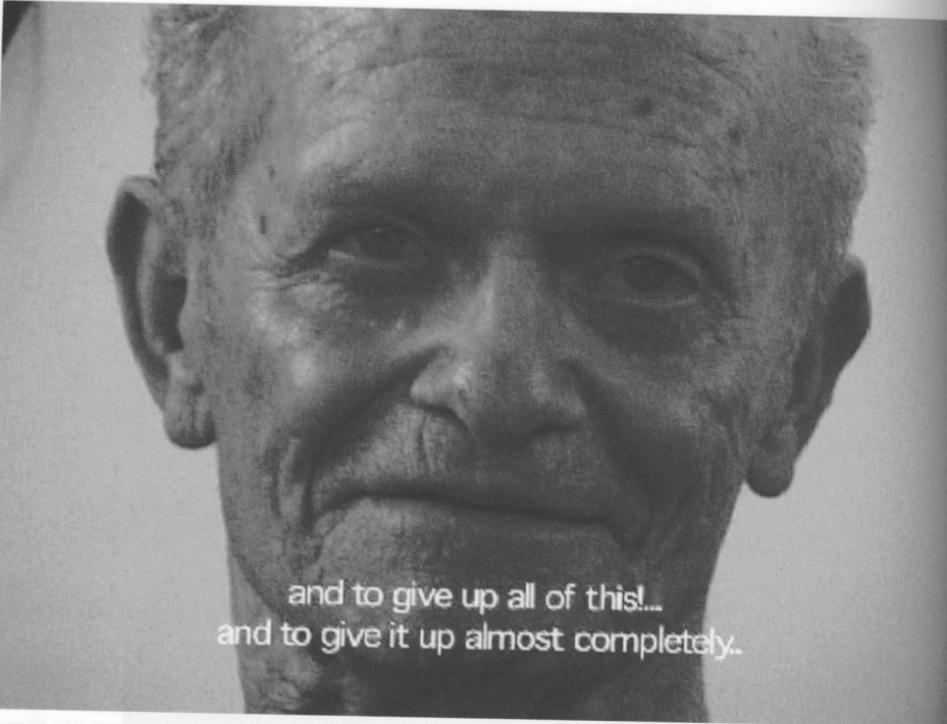


from the book *Art in the Age of Terrorism* edited by graham C  
 Terrible Beauties essay byBernadette Buckley 2005 Paul Holl



and to give up all of this!...  
 and to give it up almost completely.

It would appear then that the establishment of a connection between art and 'terrorism' is not just a contemporary malaise. The emergence of an 'artistic avant-garde' from the milieu of *revolutionary* politics (Wood 1999: 36) has for example, often been noted—as have the military connotations of that term (Poggioli 1968: 27). Thus the historical avant-gardes are typically defined as those which 'cause a break with tradition and a subsequent change in the representational system' (Bürger 1996: 62). This kind of definition relies heavily on notions of artistic avant-gardism as *revolutionary*—that is, as a set of practices thought to be *violently disruptive* of the conventions of the status quo. And if one were to refer back to the etymology of the term 'terrorist', again according to the OED, one might note that the dictionary definition has recently been broadened to include anyone who tries to 'awaken or spread a feeling of terror or alarm'. It is just such a point which Paul Virilio makes in his short book *Art & Fear*, when he claims that:

Avant-garde artists, like many political agitators, propagandists and demagogues, have long understood what TERRORISM would soon popularise: if you want a place in 'revolutionary history' there is

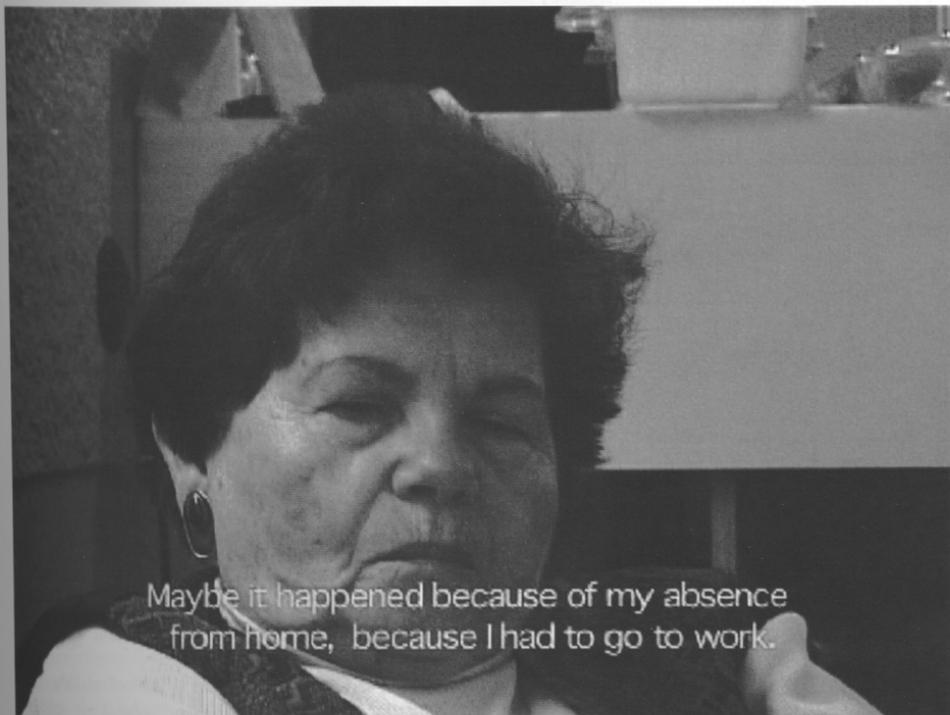
ABOVE and OPPOSITE Oreet Ashery, *Why Do You Think I Left?*, 2002, DVD. The artist interviewed members of her extended family, asking them to recount their own versions of why she left Israel.

Far from promoting a single ideological position, the resulting work demonstrated the artist's split loyalties [text pp. 25–26].

## Outler-Smith and Maurice Owen Berton Publishing

nothing easier than provoking a riot, an assault on propriety, in the guise of art. (Virilio 2004: 31)

*Art and Fear* was published after the events of September 11, 2001. Originally delivered as two lectures, Virilio makes a number of points worth summarising here for the ways in which they develop the current theme. For example in setting out his position on the connection between art and fear, Virilio describes the subject of his paper as ‘the pitiful or pitiless nature of “contemporary art”’ (Virilio 2004: 27). To support his argument, he then shoots off a rapid-fire history—from Nietzsche to Hermann Nitsch—that would seem to demonstrate how artists have in their works, been attracted to war, (notions of) cruelty and/or ‘terrorism’. He points for example, to the ‘First Futurist Manifesto of 1909’ and its slogan—*War is the world’s only hygiene*. Such an approach to art, he claims, led ‘directly, though thirty years later this time, to the shower block of Auschwitz-Birkenau’ (Virilio 2004: 31). This example is supported by others, such as that of Richard Hülsenbeck who, at a 1918 conference on new trends in art, told his audience that: ‘We were for the war. Dada today is still for war. Life should hurt. There is not enough cruelty!’ (Virilio 2004: 29).



ample as Félix Guattari does, that such practices exist in a perfect 'ethico-aesthetic paradigm' (Guattari, 1995: 98-103)—that is, in a broadly 'aesthetic' paradigm which has primacy over scientific, moral, religious or other paradigms. That theory has in any case too complex a connection with the reinvention of the subject to be fully recounted here.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, I see such practices as significant, not for their particular politics, but for their insistence that art is a domain of thought in its own right—one which co-exists with but is nevertheless somehow different from other forms of thought. In other words, it is not simply the subject matter of art that is of concern in these works, but the analytic system that they have in part developed, which assigns to the 'aesthetic' a significant capacity for ethical and/or political agency. The movement towards a 'new aesthetics' is of course quite diverse and it is important to avoid over-generalising about what is in fact a disparate set of approaches located across a range of different disciplines. However these approaches are united by a concern to re-claim the efficacy of the 'aesthetic', and to understand its political and ethical implications. In other words, the 'aesthetic' is seen in these practices as an instance of, a dimension of the ethico-political (and vice-versa)—not a mere schema which lies helplessly detached from 'proper' political spheres.

To further explore such concerns, one must however return to specific practices. In a recent exhibition held at the John Hansard Gallery (Southampton, England) a number of artists responded specifically to the US' post-2001 'war on terrorism' and this therefore makes for a useful example as to, firstly, how artists have continued to make connections between art and 'terrorism', and secondly, have viewed the 'aesthetic' as having room for ethical and political dimensions.<sup>18</sup> The exhibition is also particularly useful in that it does not offer a single perspective of 'terrorism'. Indeed, as a whole, it offers a visual critique of the philosophical, social, political and cultural interventions that the 'war against terrorism' has created. Seeking to unite artists of ethnic diversity, to emphasise their individual responses to the psychological, historical and ethical implications of the 'war on terror', the exhibition thus also deliberately ought to disavow the 'us and them' dichotomy that Bush had at that time introduced in his response to the events of 9/11. It did not seek to dis-engage 'aesthetical' from ethical (or indeed political) preoccupations. Rather it reflected a desire for 'aesthetics' to re-claim its political and ethical dimensions by fostering inter-racial dialogues between varieties of world perspectives, while at the same time avoiding—and this is crucial—an ideological instrumentalism which would have that art speak from a single 'political' source.

For example, in *Why Do You Think I Left?* [ill. pp. 14-15], Israeli-born Oreet Ashery made a DVD work in which she interviewed members of her extended family, asking them to recount their own versions of why she left Israel. Far from promoting a single ideological position, the resulting work demonstrated the artist's *split* loyalties. It produced irresolvable conflicts in her attitudes towards the 'occupied territories', towards Israel's role in the 'Palestinian crisis' and indeed towards her own family history—on one side of which was a seven-generational

family of indigenous Jews and on the other, a line of Eastern European Jewish extraction. In the DVD work, the artist herself holds her tongue, staging a struggle between 'personal' and 'political' as played out across the 'aesthetical'. Thus ethico-aesthetic concerns are combined in a single modality—an event in which aesthetical and ethical considerations are held up together—both partial and open at the same time.

In comparison with Ashery's work, Runa Islam, another artist in the John Hansard Gallery exhibition, uses BBC news footage of the collapse of the World Trade Center. Slowed down and shown in reverse [ill. pp. 10-11], the back-to-front collapse of the towers acquires a strange and *terrible* 'beauty'. The viewer is forced to contemplate events in a manner which is very different from any earlier responses they might have had to the ubiquitously shown news footage. The 'sublime' quality of the panorama is dealt with in such a way as to make the viewer ask if Karlheinz Stockhausen wasn't perhaps touching on some unmentionable aspect of any viewer's experience in describing the collapse of the World Trade Center as 'the greatest work of art ever'?

The relationship between art and 'terrorism' is more complex than Stockhausen's remark would have us believe, however. This is clear when one considers the works described above for example. The enigmatic opacity of these works—their resistance to any claims for transparency—makes the nature of that convergence between 'art' and 'terror' highly elusive and difficult to pin down discursively. The viewer is as much engaged with the 'terrible' as they are with the 'artistic' and for this reason, the work avoids becoming mere political 'instrumentalism'. In other words, the opacity of the connection between the work of 'art' and the work of 'terrorism' is concentrated in a direct engagement with the viewer—but only such that the viewer's responsiveness is split and/or doubled as a necessary condition of that encounter. Thus as these works demonstrate, it is not a matter of art merely appropriating and/or aestheticising 'terror', but of art's capacity to form an aesthetico-ethical merger—a single *event* which retains a *partial* autonomy in that it introduces the viewer to an extra-discursive mode of experience but also manages not to *renege* on the ethico-political implications of such an 'aesthetic'.

One final example worth citing is that of *irational.org* (one 'r' not two), an artists' group/network which unlike the earlier examples proffered, delves into the realms of so-called 'cyber-terrorism' and 'bio-technology'. Describing itself as:

an international system for deploying 'irational' information, services and products for the displaced and roaming. *irational.org* supports independent artists and organisations that need to maintain mission critical information systems. (*irational.org* 2004)

*irational.org* runs a number of projects—the methodologies for which are often based on those of 'international bio-terrorists' and 'computer hackers'. It builds on the writings of Hakim Bey and in particular on his *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic*