

DYING IS A SOLO

*I am a performance. I am a moment. I am a body that documents and registers.*¹
Yael Davids



Images:
A Reading that Loves-A Physical Act
Performance at the Neue Gallery, Kassel, 2017.
documenta 14
Photo: Émile Ouroumov
Courtesy of the artist



Yael Davids

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Yael Davids' body of work considers the intersection between personal and political narratives. In this interview with the curator of the exhibition, Manuela Moscoso, the artist delves into the importance of the presence, the absence and the representation of the body in her work and explores the lives of the four women that guided *Dying is a Solo*.

I would like to start this short interview by reflecting on the relationship between the performance and the installation present throughout your practice. What does this relationship mean to you and how did you build it?

In recent years, I was concerned with the distinction between the exhibition and the act. I understood that performance also means the empty moment after, the loss of the event and the longing to reconstruct the event and restore it in the exhibition space. I understand performance as something different from a spectacle, and I am interested in its resistance as it insists on extending its pressing presence into the space of the gallery wanting to contain it.

I also understood that documentation of performance might be unethical, not true to facts. It captures a moment in the past, recycling this moment as present—not admitting this abyss that opens after the performance. For me, the exhibition is a moment that presents rupture—a place where one can experience the struggle to absorb and acknowledge what has been lost. With this comes the arrangement of the material as a search for completion. Now, the performance is, in this regard, part of the show. It needs the show to exist. It grows atop the ruins of itself. There is this dynamic movement, back and forth. The performance and the exhibiting, for me, are inseparable.

¹ From Yael Davids script of the performance *A Reading that Writes – A Physical Act*, performed in Redcat, Los Angeles (2013).





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The method serves as the foundation for my current artistic investigation into the potential of combining pedagogic and heuristic methodologies in a single educational model, influenced largely because of its emphasis and attentiveness towards individual development. In this capacity, the method effectively de-centres traditional hierarchal conceptions around whose articulations are held in the highest regard.

Throughout the process of the last year, I used the Feldenkrais technique during each phase of the project. I used it daily but also as a tool to become one with the people I worked with. In the process of writing the script, I used Feldenkrais knowledge to analyse the body/movements and positions in Cornelia Gurlitt's lithographs, to cultivate an understanding in seeking to connect these positions to social and political conditions, as well as the biography of Cornelia (and other four women). These positions turned into a score, whereby the performers re-enacted the positions with all its implications, as well as manipulating activate materials (mainly glass) into similar bodily positions.

As you mentioned, in this exhibition the absence of the body in our present—specifically that of four women: the painter Cornelia Gurlitt, the poetess and playwright Else Lasker-Schüler, the Roman empress Iulia Aquilia, and Rahel Varnhagen who was known for her insightful salons—is of equal importance. How did you choose these women?

The research for the work revolved around four female protagonists whose lives carried a tragic notion and in whose biographies memory, as much as the condemnation of memory, played a central role. Else Lasker-Schüler (Germany, 1869-1945) was a German Jewish poetess and artist, who I was fascinated with since my youth. She was displaced during the early-to-mid 20th century. In 1934, she fled Berlin to Palestine and finally settled in Jerusalem. Lasker-Schüler had been an acclaimed poet before the Second World War. But in Jerusalem she lived from the charity of friends who knew her from her more prosperous days in Berlin. Eventually she died in Jerusalem, financial ruin and emotional turmoil. Her literature and letters document a decline: a fracture in identity, in belonging. This wound belonged not only to Lasker-Schüler but ran the length of an entire continent following the Second World War.¹

The other figure is the empress Iulia Aquilia Severa² (d. 222) whom I learned to know about during my research for Documenta 14, while I was visiting the Archaeology Museum, Athens. In a room depicting Roman emperors and empresses with perfect proportions, I was affected by a tall, broken sculpture of her (empress Iulia Aquilia Severa) and by the description on its label that talks about the damage of the sculpture as *damnatio memoriae* ("condemnation of memory", a form of dishonour passed by the Roman Senate on those one who brought discredit to the Roman State). This bronze sculpture is compressed flat, its face is defaced. What is asserted as

¹ See in exhibition the collage text *Else Lasker-Schüler—A Ruin, more Haunted than Inhabited by Madness*.

² See in exhibition the collage text *Iulia Aquilia Severa—Damnatio Memoriae*.

the affirmation of "not to be remembered", this defacing of the image creates a new image: a modern expressive image, a female call, a victim call. The image voices the unspoken. Here again an aesthetic that cannot be taken as such, but rather as a form of documentation of historical events.

Attempting to question the historical narrative of the Gurlitt Estate, as well as the different intersecting stories and personalities surrounding its provenance, I became specifically interested in the work of Cornelia Gurlitt³ (Germany, 1890-1919), the daughter of the well-known Dresden art historian Cornelius Gurlitt Sr. and the sister of Hildebrand Gurlitt.

During the war Cornelia was a field nurse on the Eastern Front in Vilnius, Lithuania. Those years had an intense effect on Cornelia and on her artistic imagery. In her prints she captured expressive depictions of everyday life in the city's Jewish quarter. Shortly after returning from the Eastern Front, Cornelia moved to Berlin, hoping to make a living as an artist. Suffering from depression, she committed suicide in 1919, at the age of 29.

In various respects, Cornelia is archetypical of many female artists of her generation: a talented expressionist painter, her work was never exposed to a wider public and for a long time remained sealed in the Gurlitt Estate.

Alongside the figure of Cornelia Gurlitt, the chronicle of another female personality who remained unconsidered by the canonical narrative—namely the Jewish-German writer Rahel Varnhagen—is interwoven into a performance script. Varnhagen (Germany, 1771-1833) hosted one of the most prominent Salons in Europe during the late 18th and early 19th century and became emblematic for the emancipation of both the Jewish and the female voice. Although her Salon was outspoken at that time, Varnhagen's fate remained tragic due to her strenuous efforts to escape life as a Jewish outcast, heavily discriminated in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Germany.

It is almost like a tribute to the life and work of these women, an attempt to rescue their memory, and in doing so, a way of protecting them too. You compared this act of safeguarding or preserving to martial operations, the kind of operation that has a direct link to the place where you come from, and to the state of war. This is evident within the exhibition space through the presence of the glass. Could you tell us about this correlation?

While reading your question, I realised that I read "martial" as "matriarchal". This made me think of artistic practice that grants a mother position—the one who protect and is able to be attuned to vulnerable voices and bodies not yet assimilated into the social domain.

Else Lasker-Schüler, Iulia Aquilia Severa, Cornelia Gurlitt, Rahel Varnhagen, despite the largely distinct threads of experience that characterized these four women's lives, it is apparent that each figure possessed a certain quality of knowledge (artistically, politically, spiritually) that either remained hidden throughout their

³ Six reproductions of lithographic works by Cornelia Gurlitt I use for my installation, they serve as a score for the bodies, scripts, and objects inhabiting the space.

lifetimes or was alternatively shunned. It is not time alone that rendered these women's insights neglected, but equally and perhaps more pertinently the socio-political orchestration of knowledge hierarchies. This is a pivotal element in the sense that, through studying such hierarchies, it becomes apparent that particular bodies and embodiments are granted a greater legitimacy and visibility as vessels of knowledge.

The glass sculpture in the exhibition are made by Oran Safety Glass factory in kibbutz⁴. The factory—which is Tzuba's main source of income—specializes in bulletproof glass, mostly purchased by the military for use in combat vehicles. This material has been used in many of my previous works, both as a performative prop and as a sculptural object. My use of the glass emerged from my question: When and how does the act of protection acquire an aggressive tone? I am confronted by the fragile beauty that emerges from our instinct to defend and our often-relentless struggle to preserve, whether that be ourselves or our histories. By using this glass in an art installation, I seek to subvert the violence implied by its intended function, as well as meditate on the potential to reinstate the quality of fragility, a property that is so characteristic of glass, yet it is the precise quality that bullet-proof glass must resist. The positioning of the glass next to the paper collages, and next to the exposed performing body, is an allusion to the efforts undertaken by museums to preserve artefacts; archived tokens of knowledge and history are situated within a protective interior, a border that limits interventions from an exterior.

I am haunted by the borderline between protection and detention. The protection of human bodies through the production of a fortified transparent medium and the protection/destruction of intellectual heritage through an invasive process of cultural judgement, demonstrate how the bazooka proof windshield and the redacted archives align together. These two sites of protection are in their own distinct ways violent.

By using the collages and the glass in the show to give voice to these four women, I try to bring the written printed language to its furthest fragility, thus embodying and rendering the human voice of the excluded, unaccepted, silenced and wounded. Exposing the ambivalence of the language as such. I imagine this collages as a sort of mask, a mask turned into a shield and into erasure. I would like to imagine the skin as my shield. Admitting this thin layer as my only protection, allowing cuts and wounds to shelter me.

⁴ See the text *130–200 mm glass: resistant to Bazookas, RPGs, and any other luminous rockets*.

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Yael Davids (Kibbutz Tzuba, Israel, 1968) works and lives in Amsterdam. She studied Fine Arts at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy (Amsterdam), sculpture at the Pratt Institute (New York), and dance pedagogy at the Remscheid Academy (Remscheid, Germany). Her work has been presented at the Center for Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles (2013); the Museo de Arte de Rio, Rio de Janeiro (2013); Kunsthalle Basel, Basel (2011), and documenta14, Athens and Kassel (2017).