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Salvage and Sabotage

Maya Zack, W.G. Sebald, Walter Benjamin and Chris Marker, A Further Inquiry on Image and Text
by Janet Sternburg

With [Living Room](#), an installation I sought out at [The Jewish Museum](#) in New York, Israeli artist [Maya Zack](#) is salvaging the past of a particular man, Manfred Nomburg, and through his memories of the pre-Holocaust past, the Jewish experience in Germany. Zack is honoring what once was, what was lost and now remembered. But something else is at work, subtly undermining that formulation. *Living Room* combines the immemorial impulse to salvage with a more contemporary impulse to sabotage, and suggests ways that artists and writers are bringing these impulses together, not as separate and opposite, but rather in generative conjunction.

On each wall of *Living Room's* black cube, big enough to hold five or six viewers, was a large image, 4 feet high by 10 feet wide, depicting a cross-section of the living room, dining room and kitchen of a Berlin apartment before the Second World War. A man's disembodied voice filled the cube, speaking in a gentle tone that compelled belief as he described these rooms where he grew up, before he was sent as a refugee to Israel and his parents were sent to Auschwitz. In the paper transcript, (available in the gallery), we read that "*the original interview was conducted in Hebrew. In the gallery, the English translation is voiced by an actor, Mika Adler. The artist would like to extend her special thanks to Mr. Yair Noam, the name taken by Mr. Nomburg.*"

The artist is setting the documentary scene in the usual way, giving background information and credits. But wait—the voice is not a specific man in the act of remembering—it is an actor, reading words that had been transcribed, originally spoken by Manfred Nomburg who is no longer Manfred Nomburg, but Yair Noam, the name (and perhaps the persona) that Nomburg became in exile. The images are not photographs, as they appear at first glance, but are digital reconstructions of rooms that have been imagined by the artist. The text is spoken in German-accented English, delivered without either emphasis or the ordinary hesitations of a person trying to remember; instead, with a neutrality that undermines the specificity of a person stumbling among memories, and supplants him with a stream of untethered recall.

Why should we trust the narrator to be a teller of truth simply because image and text implicitly claim correspondence? Here they are not nearly as meticulous in their relationship

and it's very impressive, but it doesn't remind him at all of where he grew up. But that, of course, was the point."

The whole edifice of documentary stability shakes, as it should. The artist's mischievous manipulation of recorded 'reality' changes *Living Room* from testimony to a meditation on memory and its inconstancies.



“... there seem to be no permanently held pictures of anything ...”

—Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, writing on 'Storing Images and Forming Images in Reca

We are in the territory of other artists who work with the disjunction of images and text to represent memory, notably among them writers [W.G. Sebald](#) and filmmaker [Chris Marker](#). Sebald was a magpie, collecting ephemera that he found at thrift shops and garage sales, dropping photographs, restaurant bills and reproductions of paintings uncaptioned into his texts. Some writers contend that Sebald used visual materials to anchor his text, to provide evidence that “this really happened.” I think otherwise—the photographs are the Sebaldian equivalent of Sherlock Holmes' ‘The game's afoot’— a strategy intended to send a reader's nose quivering, following a trail of clues sprinkled by a trickster's hand, one's interest sustained by the author never giving away whodunit. (Sebald, a trickster? This master of melancholy, the man about whom [Susan Sontag](#) wrote an essay entitled *The Mind of Mourning*.) Indeed, a trickster goes back and forth across borders, living in limbo, an itinerant state artistically commensurate with loss as well as mischief.)

Whodunit? This is the question we are made to ask of images and narrators. In his essay-novel *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald invents a narrator who hovers between an autobiographical and a fictionalized “I”. Is Sebald asking: Are there such big differences between the two? Does it matter—to you, to me—whether I am telling my own experience or something I've imagined? Or an amalgam? And, in the larger picture, is this space of not knowing closer to the truths of our experience than the certainty of choosing one side over the other?



The space of not knowing is where the self is receptive and porous, the sine qua non of creativity. The best description of porosity that I know occurs in [Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood, around 1900*](#), a book that shares psychic space with Sebald and Zack: *“Early on, I learned to disguise myself in words, which really were clouds. The gift of perceiving similarities is, in fact, nothing but a weak remnant of the old compulsion to become similar . . . In me, however, this compulsion acted through words. Those that made me similar to dwelling places, furniture, clothes.”* *Berlin Childhood* is a collection of memories from the beginning of the twentieth century written as fragments from the double perspective of the child who is entering the life of objects, and the adult who is shadowed by his knowledge that these objects and rooms are about to vanish.

This is not a Benjamin we often get to know; it is the philosopher as poet who, in his contemplation of the everyday, is closer to the [Pablo Neruda of *Elemental Odes*](#) than to the [Theodor W. Adorno of *Negative Dialectics*](#). Benjamin has written an ode in prose to the erotics of socks that also conjures his fascination with the useful simultaneity and conjunction of so-called opposites. *“I would come upon my socks, which lay piled in traditional fashion —that is to say, rolled up and turned inside out. Every pair had the appearance of a little pocket. For me, nothing surpassed the pleasure of thrusting my hand as deeply as possible into its interior. I did not do this for the sake of the pocket's warmth. It was ‘the little present’ rolled up inside... I drew it ever nearer until something disconcerting would happen. I had brought out ‘the present’ but ‘the pocket’ in which it had lain was no longer there. I could not repeat the experiment on this phenomenon often enough. It taught me that form and content, veiled and unveiled are the same.”*



In Chris Marker's [*Sans Soleil*](#), the persona of the narrator is both veiled and unveiled, a strategy similar to Sebald's for asking questions of identity. An unnamed woman is reading letters,

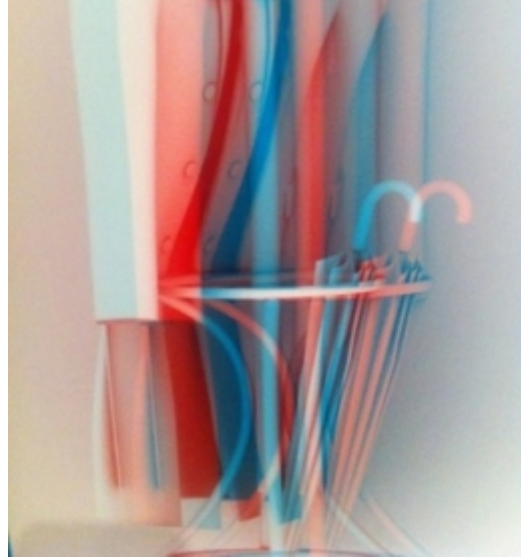
want to see this artist's mischief in action, I recommend going to: [Sandor Krasna's photostream at flickr.com](#); Marker has also assigned Krasna a birthdate and biography as well as a musician kid brother.) Along with Zack and Sebald, Marker uses words as though they are unreliable witnesses in a court of ambiguous images, supposedly used to nail down the facts of time and place, but seem instead to have been placed there by an authorial imp who knows that they owe their existence to somewhere else entirely: here to draw out through juxtaposition Marker's critique of the devastations of the twentieth century.



"It's tempting to speculate about whom he {Chris Marker} might identify as the "director" of Sans Soleil, . . . The twentieth century seems a likely guess..." —[Jonathan Rosenbaum](#)

The twentieth century is the director too of Maya Zack, of Walter Benjamin, of W. G. Sebald, all making art in a time of unprecedented migrations, diasporas, and exiles. How do they and we as artists reconcile the safety and comforts of the living room with the perils and absence of the leaving room, the shift from security to a precarious place that no longer exists but still haunts? Remembering his visits to his grandmother's apartment, Benjamin writes, *"What words can describe the almost immemorial feeling of bourgeois security that emanated from this apartment,"* continuing this theme with its aftermath: *"The images of my metropolitan childhood. . . will at least suggest how thoroughly the person spoken of here would later dispense with the security allotted his childhood."*

Loss demands new forms of expression. In *Living Room*, Maya Zack offers viewers the option to look at her images with and without 3D glasses. For many people, certainly those who wrote their comments in a guest book, the magic of the piece seems to come when they put on the glasses and see, as the curator describes it, *"the images came to life."* But with that eliding comes a resolution which is, I think, two-dimensional. For me, the moving aspect of these images is before one puts the glasses on, when each object is surrounded by red and blue ghostly filters that seem to quiver in anticipation of resolving into one vision. Seeing the color separations to participate not in an illusory space but rather one that represents the rifts of history: split, fragmented, disjunctive, vertiginous.



Benjamin writes, “I believe it is possible that a fate expressly theirs is held in reserve for such images. No customary forms await them ...” No customary forms indeed. The strategy of deliberate ambiguity of not either/or but both, leaves room for an artist to create subtle representations of self. That loss of security in *Living Room* leads to a visual metaphor that surprises; in the midst of the bourgeois rooms with their music stand and tea kettle and china cups and saucers is a broken wall, a big gaping space behind the kitchen sink that looks as though it has been attacked with a hammer. “There were many things that I added,” Zack said, “Like the hole in the wall—that was my invention.” The hole is the space through which the artist is peering. She has room for her observing eye and consciousness. The disruption of a broken wall in a supposedly intact room; to the viewer, a potent metaphor for how an artist sees in relation to what she makes.



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