

MEMORY ENGINEERED

Yehouda Shenhav

In his book *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez describes the outbreak of amnesia in a Colombian village. At first, childhood memories become blurred, then the names of things and their meanings, and finally people's identity and the awareness of their very existence. The townspeople sink into an "idiocy that [has] no past." In order to fight loss of memory, one fortuneteller suggests reading the cards not for the future, but for the past.

Aureliano comes up with a solution of sorts for this loss of memory. Before he himself is afflicted with the plague, he proposes attaching to each and every object an inscription bearing its name. José Arcadio takes the task upon himself. With a brush dipped in ink, he labels each and every object throughout the entire village: "table, chair, clock, door, wall, bed, pan." Then he goes to the corral, and marks: "cow, goat, pig, hen . . ." Exploring the infinite possibilities of a loss of memory, he realizes that the day might come when things would be recognized by their inscriptions, but that no one would remember their use. Thus he decides to be more explicit. On the sign around the cow's neck he writes: "This is the cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk."

Thus the inhabitants of the town went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which was bound to escape them irremediably once they forgot the value of the written words. "The sign that he hung on the neck of the cow," writes Márquez, "was an exemplary proof of the way in which the inhabitants of Macondo were prepared to fight against loss of memory."

Adi Nes, in his carefully staged photographs, presents a refined set of mnemonic technology vis-à-vis the Israeli amnesia epidemic. Born in the peripheral town of Kiryat Gat, Nes, like Aureliano of Macondo, prepared inscriptions and signs with which to label figures, objects, and social phenomena while there was still time, before the epidemic of oblivion broke out. Ostensibly simple in appearance, his signs are, in fact, highly accurate creations, perhaps concealing perhaps revealing the energy invested in their making. By means of a camera, which by its very nature bounds a world within a frame, Nes created his signs, which combine into a collage of a kaleidoscopic "identity," an identity that has so patiently waited for the arrival of future technology. The components of this identity remained in the depths of his private memory. Now they have been imagined within a frame, so as to contain no more than Nes would have liked.

Against the plague of amnesia Nes sets a hi-tech memory technology; hi-tech in a neighborhood where youngsters do not go into hi-tech; hi-tech which is both rigid and flexible enough, engineered yet remarkably creative, accurate but wild, meticulous yet defiant in its meticulousness.

I asked Nes to show me his working portfolio, the production rather than the photographs portfolio; the one in which artists keep the drafts, sketches, and indications of "inefficiency" encountered in the process they have gone through. In reply to my request



On location. Photographers: Harel Oren, Aya Gada, Meirav Heiman.

Nes pulled out of his bag a pile of papers organized in perfect order, all typed in the exact same format. They contained lists of models and accessories to be brought for the set; the phone number of Shimon of the production team, 051-24..., and other phone and cellular numbers; addresses of extras on the waiting list; updates about who did and who didn't show up for the shoot; gas station receipts; shopping lists: pickles, bread, 5% fat salted cheese; generator rental; miscellaneous. There were also other production-related details: need a "scrap bowl" for the soldiers' "Last Supper" photograph; buy nose drops for the driver. There were also lists of on-location security officers, since the shootings took place in border settlements and development towns. They are still there, where they had been scattered as part of the population dispersal policy.

Counter-intuitively, Adi Nes introduces a subversive style of management. It involves maximum investment and minimum products. Ostensibly, it defies all laws of efficiency, which maintain maximum production with minimum investment. But in view of the Israeli amnesia epidemic, it is precisely those who work contrary to the laws of efficiency who may by far be more efficient in fighting against the plague, which is the most efficient of all organizations.

Out of this mnemonic technology emerges a sequence of photographs, which seem to have just come off the production line. The photographs are still wet from the developing materials of the development towns, or the developing lab; wet like the wet canvas of mythological figures. It is a collection of images of teenage boys with the beauty of Greek gods. Young boys, whose familiar, mundane bodies are rendered sublime. An unattainable man is posed on a pedestal; he exalts the familiar, transforming it to sublime, for he conceals the austerity with which he had been imagined. Removed from his production technology, he is too punctilious to be real. He manifests sculpted, split love, divided into execution details and technical specifications, which tame the passion—the virility that threatens to flood the frame, translating it into a plethora of miniscule gestures which freeze in infinity.

Vis-à-vis the grand myths, Nes introduces a mythology of his own, based on scenes of occurrence and figures drawn from the periphery, from the "margins" of "Israeliness." Vis-à-vis Danziger's *Nimrod* myth he sets the adolescent boy of the development town. He thus shifts us from the masculine body embodying a self-assured nationalism to the doubting, hesitant boyish body. Against the body of the sabra with the hawk, the one from Petra, an ancient hunter with a hawk, Nes juxtaposes an adolescent with the first signs of a moustache and on his shoulder a crow. Yaakov Shabtai's patriotic man, the one from *Memorandum*, who, not incidentally, had come to epitomize the ultra-national party Moledet, is multiplied and rendered multi-cultural in Nes's works.

Nes's seemingly "inefficient," highly invested-in memory technology generates a seductive product, which may well become the start-up of a sweeping social trend. It is the start-up of a multi-cultural identity with high proceeds. This alluring product may

serve as a preventive measure against a loss of memory and as a means for reinforcing memory that had been repressed, suppressed, and denied.

In these works, the homophobic sabra sexuality suddenly declares itself as homoerotic. The emotional compactness of youth cadet corps, the all-boys boarding school, the Israel defense forces—is here translated to six boys sleeping on five mattresses, or to a situation of near-rape, three on top of one, in a deserted stairwell, as ugly as the one remembered from the Israeli movie *Lovesick On Nana Street*.

A desire which the boys do not know how to consummate. It is still not homosexuality. It is manifested in homoerotic relations between boys inter-visually related to the soldiers with the red scarves from the previous exhibition. This genealogy, even if it does not legitimize homosexual relations, still subverts the hegemonic status of heterosexuality. The boys re-consider themselves in a world depicted here without women.

There are no women in Nes's photographs, save the one portraying Adonis—the beautiful youth born to King Cinyras (according to one version) and his daughter, Smyrna, whom Aphrodite hid in Persephone's chest, who, in turn, refused to return him, even though she had eaten of the underworld's pomegranate; Adonis spent the summer with Aphrodite and the winter with Persephone, but Artemis, who bore a grudge against Aphrodite, sent a wild boar to attack and wound him. From his drops of blood the Anemone grew. The myth of Adonis portrays a world of ten women. Adi Nes's photograph draws upon both the mythological air and the air of the fan blowing the women's dresses in-between their legs, creating a story for men only, albeit all about women.

In Nes's new series of works there is no homosexuality yet. The "yet" is the "in-between" of the liminal realm, the third domain. It can become a guidepost indicating either entry or no entry. It places us on a crossroads, where the boundaries become clearer, and we can either cross or blur them.

Adi Nes liberates the local boy from the border settlement where he was born, vesting him with the figure of Narcissus. Through mythology he opens for this boy "new horizons"—which is also the name of an educational association for development towns—the horizons of boundless mythology. Likewise, the bomb-shelter in the town of Ofakim—where we encounter the twins, Castor and Pollux (Polydeuces), sons of Zeus, who became gods and were doomed to live alternately on the Olympus and in Hades—represents in this context a type of trespassing. The photograph features both the Olympus of art and science and the underworld where humans dwell. At some fleeting moments, Nes transfers the humans from the underworld to the Olympus, thus engendering reviviscence, if only imaginary, of a potential, albeit unrealized, possibility.

Adi Nes does not want to forget, therefore he delves into memory. Yet he omits to ask himself—just as Alice had not asked herself when following the white rabbit down the large rabbit-hole under the hedge—the big question underlying the identity game: "how in the world she was to get out again."

Should I stay in the magical hole or awaken from the dream? At this crucial moment of deliberation the photographer presses the camera button. Relinquishing naivete, he seduces the viewers into the hole, knowing that their entry would allow him to remain there as well. The hole is the scene of occurrence on the border settlement. Not the one seen in the photograph itself, in the work of art, but rather the site before and after the photographic process: the gathering in the shooting location, the cacophony of voices, the ugliness of public housing and the stairwell.

Nes's works are fastidious, sterile photographs, but at the same time, they serve as an entry ticket into this wild world. They simultaneously embed tension and blurring of boundaries between artistic representation of reality and reality itself.

Nes's magical realism, like that of Márquez, blurs the boundary between dream and reality. In the interspace between these lies the key to a space which transforms from a real place (in the past) into a small peephole, a gradually shrinking slit (in the present); into a twilight zone between fiction and reality, between the staged and the documentary, between Kiryat Gat of the former days and Kiryat Gat of the present; it is the space which makes it possible to activate the imagination and fantasy, where, paradoxically, the reliable dimension of reality lies hidden.

Adi Nes's current project is not concerned with the sense of reality alone. It furnishes us with the sense of possibility, of which Robert Musil wrote in his wonderful book *The Man Without Qualities*: "So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not. The consequences of so creative a disposition can be remarkable, and may, regrettably, often make what people admire seem wrong, and what is taboo permissible." Indeed, Adi Nes's project sets out to effectuate this very inversion; to rule out the sanctified and unleash the forbidden. In a place marked by restriction, regimentation and oppression, this is a significant option. Adi Nes's new works reinstate us with a gaze we have been denied.