

FRAGMENTS FROM OUR BEAUTIFUL FUTURE

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“Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits.”
Michel Foucault

CONTEMPORARY-ANCIENT: NOW AND THEN
Fragments From Our Beautiful Future owes its name to an expression used by Claude Cahun, Surrealist artist and writer, in the closing lines of her 1930 book *Aveux non Avenus* (*Avowals not Admitted*) where she addresses an unknown stranger:

“Dear Strangers, keep your distance:
I have only you in the world ...
My beautiful future, the unhopd for reserve,
comes to me Present already past.”¹

“An image is that in which the Then and the Now come into a constellation like a flash of lightning.”² Like Claude Cahun, as well as Walter Benjamin and ancient Arab rabbis—among them especially Ibn Bajja (Avenpace) and Moses Maimonides in the 12th and 13th centuries—our exhibition explores a landscape of objects, of letters and images, visual and medieval poetry, all contemporary ancient, in which „the Then and the Now“ enter a constellation evoking sudden flashes of lightning or evidence:

“You should not think that these great *secrets* are fully and completely known to anyone among us. They are not. But sometimes truth flashes out to us ... We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again.”³

Fragments From Our Beautiful Future exhibits erratic moments of the visual and poetic imagination in which the visitor, in a flash of sudden recognition,

1 Cahun, *Aveux non Avenus*, 1930. (Reprint, Paris: Éditions Mille et une nuits, 2011); *Disavowals: or Cancelled Confessions*, transl. de Muth (Boston: MIT, 2007), p. 225; cited by Company, *a Handful of Dust. from the Cosmic to the Domestic* (London: MACK, 2015), p. 15.

2 Benjamin, “N [On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress],” in: *Benjamin. Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 49.

3 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, transl. Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 7, emphasis by the editors of the English edition.

may witness an upheaval of power, thus re-imagining the order of things.⁴

The art of looking at things from the perspective of an unknown (“dark”) yet “beautiful future” is developed by the artists into a poetico-political technique.

The spatial definition of this exhibition, its dreamlike suspension, is inspired by ancient and contemporary theories of time in which the future precedes and gives rise to the past. Such theories were developed by Pre-Socratics, 10th-century Arab thinkers, medieval rabbis, Freud, Benjamin, Warburg, Surrealists and Dadaists, inspiring contemporary collaborators, artists and thinkers alike.

CUT-UP: KALAM MEETS DADA

Habitually familiar objects, murals, and medieval miniatures present themselves in startling disguises for this exhibition. In the 10th century, Arab philosophers conceived of a form of atomic time that made a surprising comeback in the 20th century. In defense of God’s radical freedom in dealing with His creation, these Kalam thinkers⁵ presented a radical claim for creative freedom that was part of a 10th-century theological argument in creation theory: they demanded the dissociation of the moment, of any single moment, from the causal chains of events. Claiming that “continuity” is but a filmic illusion of habitual thinking,⁶ they developed a performative, visual and temporal cut-up technique, which recurred one-thousand years later in the artworks of Surrealists,

4 Elliot R. Wolfson points out that, for Maimonides, even the prophetic vision remains related to the dreamlike state mediated through the poetic and visual imagination. See Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream. Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), p. 119.

5 Kalam is a 10th- to 13th-century school of thought, a philosophical discourse among Arab thinkers engaging creation theories, physics, cosmology, ethics, grammar, philology and more in an attempt to develop an explanation of the universe. There are many different strings of Kalam to follow. For a first orientation, see Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Kalam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

Dadaists and Fluxus artists. Cut-up matter, illegible surfaces, matters in disguise, concealed elements, funny jokes, and visual poetry spark our poetic imagination. This poetic imagination, this “detour via nothingness,” this oneiro-poetic technique to perceive things “otherwise-than-being”⁷ assumes the radical power of re-creating the universe:

“All existence is [but] an imagination
within an imagination,
... being a dream within a dream.”⁸

MIRRORS AND DREAMS

Via a detour through what Claude Cahun calls her “beautiful future,” she is facing, re-imagining, witnessing, unveiling an abysmal past. What the ancient scholars named *tikkun olam*⁹ becomes an artistic method. *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future* exhibits an epistemic architecture which undermines the linearity of time.

The contemporary artwork no longer finds itself at the end of a long process of history, but rather becomes itself a point of “beginning,” a point in which and from which time unfolds, a mirror in which the artistic imagination compresses time and matter into a unique constellation of “Then and Now.”¹⁰

6 House of Taswir is indebted to the inspiration of Beirut artist, thinker, filmmaker and writer Jalal Toufic, who argues the congeniality of 10th-century Kalam creation theory with present-day discourses in contemporary art. Toufic suggests a connection between Kalam and film theory, referring specifically to the “filmic illusion” of a continuum in time created by the rapid succession of images, cf. his book *Forthcoming*, (Berkeley: Atelos, 2000), p. 135-136; also Bruckstein Çoruh, *House of Taswir. Doing and Undoing Things. Notes on Epistemic Architecture(s)*, (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2014), p. 112, n. 50 with handwritten upper margin.

The result is a re-mingling of matter, a palimpsest of artistic interpretation, a *pictorial scene of writing* in which each and every artwork acts like a mirror to all others: “Turn it and turn it, everything is in it.”⁷ Not by chance is this rabbinic saying related to an ancient holy text that demands an ongoing act of commentary, one containing infinitely splintered layers of past and future interpretations at work all at once and yet evolving over time. Similar to the dynamic Freud describes in his dream-work, *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future* presents itself as a pictorial scene, one in which diachronic elements are organized horizontally as a spread of images. Categories of “before” and “after” no longer hold; a poetic site emerges in which rules of grammar expressed as “but,” “however,” “or” and “not yet” are suspended:

“When the whole mass of dream-thoughts is brought under the pressure of the dream-work, its elements turned about, broken into fragments and jammed together, the question arises of what happens to the logical connections which have hitherto formed its framework.”¹²

SIMULACRA: WHERE TIME GETS FLUID

Fragments From Our Beautiful Future introduces an ambiguity of vision and an intense experience of disorientation with respect to the parameters of time we hold as habit. Encountering Steve Sabella’s “archaeological” fragments and Rebecca Raue’s “medieval” paintings next to the magnificent objects of The Bumiller Collection—11th-century chess pieces and dice, 17th-century decorated mirrors—the visitor enters a multi-layered synopsis of diachronic references, a splintered scene in which past and future become fluid and time itself spatial. Both artists lead our per-

ception astray. In Sabella’s sculptural fragments and Rebecca Raue’s mixed-media pictography, fiction and reality are intertwined. Though taking diametrically opposed working methods, the interlacing of “then” and “now” is provoked in both series by a meticulous artistic process in which photography and sculpture here, photography and painting there gives rise to a poetic allusion.

Steve Sabella’s *38 Days of Re-Collection* is comprised of black-and-white photographs imprinted upon colored shards of paint. Peeled from the walls of houses in the Old City of Jerusalem, including the house in which Sabella was born, the fragments present a unique archive of personal memory and displacement. What appears to be findings from an archaeological dig are in essence pieces of filmic illusion: we see interiors, kitchen utensils, domestic galleries of family portraits, toys and other personal items from an Israeli household residing in an early-20th-century Arab house. The original owners escaped in 1948 with their belongings seized and their estate occupied by the State. Sabella’s photographic fragments, shards of a mural, contain detailed patterns, shadows of floor tiles typical for the elaborate architecture of the “Arab house”—in doing so, the series claims the artist’s own “law of return.” Steve Sabella’s pieces of the Old City quite physically inscribe the occupation into his own body, while at the same time mending what has been painfully rent apart.

Rebecca Raue’s acryl and mixed media interventions, on the other hand, follow quite a different path. The artist presents a joyful *métissage*, a *jouissance* of strong colors and penciled scribbles staged on the aluminum-mounted scans of 18th-century illustrated manuscripts from the *Kalila wa Dimna* series—a collection of inter-

7 An allusion to the title of Emmanuel Levinas’ *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, transl. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

8 Arabi, *Fusus al-hikam*. 13th century; *The Bezels of Wisdom*, transl. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 121–125; quoted from Bruckstein Çoruh, *House of Taswir*, p. 218, in non-consecutive order. This citation is written as mural plot on the exhibition walls of Bumiller Studio X-Berg. Additionally, in the closing lines of Steve Sabella’s book *The Parachute Paradox*, the artist’s daughter is recorded to emphatically commend her father on Arabi’s realism: “Imagine if it was the other way around, that dreams were reality and reality was a dream.” (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2016), p. 296.

9 Literally “mending the world” in Hebrew, an early rabbinic concept central to the cosmological, ethical and political dimensions of messianic discourse throughout its literary history. Hermann Cohen, the Jewish Neo-Kantian who speaks of a “detour via nothingness” when thinking from future to past, claims: “The future contains and unveils the essence of time ... What came first was not the past, but the future.” *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1997), p. 154, my translation.

10 The 2009 Taswir exhibition at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, including 65 participating artists and over 20 international collections of Islamic Art, was the result of such a contemporary-ancient intervention.

related and often illuminated animal fables first reaching the Arab language from Hindu in the 8th century. Rebecca Raue’s artistic entries provoke a state of dizziness. The boundaries between the 18th-century illuminations and her own interventions are blurred; copy and original coil together; photographic surface and the brush of the artist become indivisible. With her stunning pictorial commentary, Rebecca Raue exposes inside the medieval tales a fantastic dream-world of visual poetry.

PICTORIAL SCENES OF WRITING: “READ ME!”

Elliot R. Wolfson, in his majestic work on kabbalistic and Sufi literature of the 12th and 13th centuries, defines holy texts, poetry, and dreams as pictorial scenes of writing into which all future readings are already inscribed beforehand, to the effect that the original itself is conceived of as a copy without original.¹³ The exhibition at hand quite simply develops this kind of writing that “invariably transgresses its limits” and “unfolds like a game”¹⁴ into a curatorial method.

Holy texts, poetry, dreams, and *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future* are inextricably linked to future readings, to layers of performative commentary yet to be inscribed.

Visitors, flaneurs, scholars and even future artists are invited to work their own perspectives into these fragments, overflowing like margins of an ancient text.

11 Rabbinic source, *Pirke Avot* 5:25, my translation.

12 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 4, ed./transl. Trachey, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976), p. 328.

13 This formulation is taken from Bruckstein Çoruh, *House of Taswir*, p. 105.

14 See the poetic motto above, and Foucault, “What is an Author?,” epigraph of Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being. Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham, 2005), cited by Bruckstein Çoruh, *House of Taswir*, p. 143.