

TRAPPED IN THE GESTURES OF THE DAY-TO-DAY

On the Works of Elyasaf Kowner

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The video works and stills presented in Elyasaf Kowner's exhibition call attention to his creative point of departure - that of an artist who creates while strolling in the city, in the tradition of the roving photographer. While the exhibition does include works that digress from this context, and despite the difference in form between various works, one can still point to a common thread running through them: a constant indication of a different and sometimes enigmatic dimension that flickers from within the apparent simplicity of gestures and fragments of reality caught on camera.

Kowner's camera documents segments of daily events, which undergo minimal editing, and some of these segments are presented almost as stills. Most scenes are based on interaction between individuals, which the camera singles out from the movement of the crowd and from tumultuous urban life. The filming, which tends to focus on various physical gestures, charges the human action with strains of despair and hope destined to be endlessly repeated. The segments are taken out of coherent context and the viewer is invited to infuse them with subjective meaning. These moments - blending softness with violence, daily routine with elements of surprise and even ecstasy - are captured by a curious and sometimes empathetic eye that yields to random phenomena and events, not from a critical standpoint but from attentiveness to the contemporary rhythm of life that pulses in the city and on its fringes. The random journalistic element and the esthetical choices that characterize Kowner's works enable them to be read as a whole that signifies a hidden facet of reality, which can be glimpsed through them.

The acts of roving and focusing on the ephemeral experience are linked to existing traditions that examine the moment of photography in space and time. One such example

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is the capturing of "*the decisive moment*" - a term linked to the photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson, who began his work in the 1930s. This moment, intensely charged with the emotions and activities that fill it, reveals the inner meaning of events beyond their mere documentation. Another example is provided by the activities of the Situationists (led by Guy Debord), who during the 1960s championed the *dérive* in urban space as a critical action which, in calling one's attention to the entrapment of the city by the patterns of modern urban consumerism, aims to diverge from these patterns. However, Kowner's activity in urban space is related to a different state of mind, one not based on a structured critical viewpoint but rather on an experiential and sometimes poetic foundation, which consists mainly of human gestures.

Kowner's work can be viewed and discussed in light of an early phenomenon of modernism, related to roving the urban space - the *flâneur*, a term for the urban stroller whose eye captures the intricacy of the modern city. This concept, which developed in 19th-century literary and artistic circles, became something of an ideal *weltanschauung* - especially in Paris - demarking the artist's place in modern times, with the development of the metropolitan city. Through the eyes of the *flâneur*, the urban experience is exposed as a cultural, social, economical and political activity (as articulated in the works of Walter Benjamin).

In *The Art of Taking a Walk*, Anke Gleber describes the *flâneur's* point of view as both the gaze of a drifter who yields to the city's sensory stimulation and focuses on the surrounding styles, and a representation of an inventory, which includes sensations that are novel in their contemporary context. The *flâneur* specializes in perceiving and establishing the mental heterogeneity of city life with his observation of passers-by, as a starting point that structures the many various aspects of street life, which he documents only partially and in a fragmented manner.¹ Gleber maintains that the *flâneur's* strolls are an act of reading and interpretation that turns the flickering of motion into a stationary continuum. The critical potential of the *flâneur's* actions is anchored in his attention to details, much like a private eye or a hunter motivated by fascination with the semiotic space of the urban environment.² In many ways, these ideas can be linked to Kowner's works, which are primarily based on tracing the signals transmitted by the city at the onset of the 21st century. In regard to video art, one should note Gleber's comment that the cinematic media and the *flâneur* are essentially linked to modern perception. The *flâneur* strives for the redemption and liberation of modern reality and contains the underlying sensory sensitivity; the same is possible

for the cinematic lens, an intrinsically modern medium which defines the city's visual space, the public sphere and the everyday realms.³ Kowner's observation of the events he encounters while strolling is thus fundamentally linked to the possibilities which the documentary cinematic lens has defined in its modern urban context.

Activity in urban space has already found its expression in an earlier stage of Kowner's work - his graffiti work in New York City's East Village in the first half of the 1990s. Defining his work as "night art," Kowner began by painting on newspapers and then gluing his paintings in the street, and later engaged the technique of spray-painting his works using stencils. His works referenced the advertising world, particularly in a series of colorful, seductive images of high-heeled shoes with captions such as "Elyasaf Kowner - Paris," "Pure Timeless Seduction" and "Desire Has No Limit." Naturally, the Parisian identity of Kowner-the-shoe-salesman is fictive. The fleeting essence of the works and their elusive dialogue with the outside world (is it art, or is it a collection of enticing idioms for promotional purposes?) are intrinsic characteristics of the attempt to blur the boundaries of defined imagery. These paintings operate in a twilight zone that stretches between different images, and this complements their activity under the auspices of the dark as "night art." In many ways, the videos and stills in this exhibition point to a consistent rationale in Kowner's works; they often focus your gaze on an isolated and intense image, occasionally anecdotal or seductive, which reflects the oblique tensions and gaps asking to be filled in.

A clear example of this can be found in the video work *Dynamism of a Phone Booth* (2004), filmed in Paris. In this work, which presents an anecdotal situation, the stationary camera focuses on a woman standing in a phone booth. The frame captures the woman's torso from chest to knees. Her head and hand that holds the receiver cannot be seen; her actions are represented solely by the slight movements of her torso. The center of the frame is occupied by a small dog, whose tan-colored fur matches the tone of the woman's clothes, sitting inside her purse and peering at the camera. The image of the woman becomes a fixed, anonymous and mute picture, but the anonymity of this urban image is disrupted by the interaction with the dog, via its response to the filmmaker. The tension between anonymity and intimacy, foreignness and communicativeness, is thus expressed through a minute, anecdotal situation isolated from the urban din.

Green Grass (2004), filmed in Amsterdam, also isolates a moment within urban existence.

The setting is a city park, a man-made island of nature in the urban environment. *Green Grass* is also filmed with a stationary camera focusing on an isolated activity. The bottom of the frame captures tall, blurred grass, since the camera is focused on a couple sitting on the grass in the distance, across a pond (which cannot be seen in the frame); beyond them is a lane occasionally crossed by bicycle traffic. The entire frame suggests concentration on a distant, continuous activity of a non-narrative nature. The man lies with his head on the woman's knees as she braids his hair. Their contrasting tones of skin – the woman's complexion is fair, the man's dark – stands out at first glance. The entire situation is strikingly colorful – the contrasting skin tone of the protagonists, the glistening green grass and the striking red-and-white items in their attire.

But an attentive examination of the work reveals the subtleties of the situation. The woman, who seems to be bitter and harangued, is fervently speaking to the man lying comfortably at her feet, and seems to be articulating intense emotions. Although their voices are too distant to be heard, the soundtrack creates a disconcerting effect, since a vague murmur accompanies the film – the voices of Kowner and a female companion. The viewer is aware that there is no correlation between picture and soundtrack. This creates a kind of situational split, as far as aural and visual information are concerned. The camera is focused on people who are unaware of being filmed, but, simultaneously, the soundtrack turns the viewer's attention to a vague transaction happening elsewhere. This creates a sensation of blurred boundaries between different subjects and situations, including the filmmaker himself – the roving artist. Once again, the feeling created is that of being trapped in a realm of physical gestures and emotional expressions that generate a kind of world separated from its surroundings.

Around the Fire (2003) was filmed at the *Beresheet Festival* – a festival in the new-age, tribal spirit, annually held on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Kowner's lens – usually directed at the urban experience – now roves into a space that is not defined as urban by nature and yet isn't detached from urban experience, since communities of this nature have come into existence within Israeli cities, especially during the last decade. If the context of *Green Grass* was that of a kind of artificial island of nature within the city, here we encounter a pseudo-tribal gathering of modern people in an extra-urban space, in nature's midst. However, what this festival, with its various spiritual workshops and jamborees, represents on a cultural level, is also strongly present in the pulse of city life and contemporary culture. The concept of “roving the city” is metaphorically extended to the attentiveness to contemporary social phenomena and cultural dynamics, beyond

the limited geographical contexts of the city.

In this work, the lens moves across a crowd creating a large circle around a bonfire during the daytime. The general context is of an ecstatic jamboree which includes dancing and playing tribal instruments. The camera focuses especially on one man performing a kind of prayer-rite for rain, consisting of ritual singing, and the intense dancing of two young, nearly naked men, leaping on each other ecstatically. The gestures of these characters seem to aim at a primal tribal expression. However, the camera nonetheless captures the nuances: modern underwear underneath the pseudo-tribal loincloth rags of the dancers; people whose code of clothing and appearance are atypical of such “tribal” gatherings; different facial expressions – some festive, some restrained; and various other subtleties linked to the social activity. The filmmaker’s curious view can be perceived as the empathic gaze of a man who partakes in the activities, but also as that of an alert outsider looking to capture different nuances. In a manner similar to the way he engages urban space, Kowner focuses mainly on the relation between the individual, isolated by the camera for an instance, and the crowd surrounding him. Despite the film’s documentary nature, these subtleties create a refined, multi-layered and sometimes lingering experience, tuned to the hidden frequencies and the expressions of an individual in an all-embracing collective activity.

The two following video works are of a different nature than the previous ones, as they were not filmed on the roam. However, in many ways they point to an experiential element that is common to Kowner's body of work, though it is less obvious here.

Houdini Triptych (2005) comprises three screens. The first displays a head, resembling that of a medieval monastic figure, with a blanket shrouded round it like a pointed cloak, creating a triangular composition of the head imagery. The image is displayed in a bluish-tinted negative that gives it a simultaneously enchanted and threatening feeling – the air of a dark holiness. Because of the decision to project the image in negative, the dark spaces in the original image – the oral cavity, the nostrils, the shadowed space between the cloak and the neck – appear to bask in light, a morbid-grotesque intensification of image’s aspect of holiness. The cloaked figure continually repeats a key phrase – “It's not me, it's you.” Since the image is presented in slow motion, the tone of the figure's voice is slower and low-pitched. The nature of the visual imaging and the slowed-down sound make it difficult to perceive that the figure's gender is female.

The central screen is flanked by two screens, on which two identical images are projected in opposing directions, creating a kind of mirror image. These images include a brief segment from the Buster Keaton comedy, *The Navigator* (1924), in which Keaton and his female lover are adrift on the Atlantic Ocean. Keaton, wearing a massive diving suit, is floating face-up, while his companion sits on his torso rows them across the water. Keaton's facial expressions, visible through the helmet on his head, project severe respiratory distress, and he points to his neck in attempt to signal this distress. This segment, which includes shots from different angles and distances, is continually repeated via Kowner's editing, and because of the opposing directions of projection on the two screens, the Keaton characters appear to be rowing away from the central image. Both screens displaying the Keaton segment are also tinted blue, and the original musical score of the film is intertwined with the voice of the hooded figure on the central screen.

In its entirety, the work blends a dark-spiritual dimension with comical-grotesque imaging, creating a charged experience. Despite the notable difference between *Houdini Triptych* and the works previously described, it too projects a sensation of characters trapped in their gestures, repeated over and over without any narrative development. It also seems that Kowner, whose works deal with the consistent experience of establishing reality by lingering over isolated details, manifests this infrastructural principle in a theoretical manner - a gaze capturing a piece of reality from which other dimensions, denoting a branching and broadening of this reality, can be derived. Anyone observing these gestures winds up projecting his own world on them anyway - an act that can be literally linked with the utterings of the hooded figure, "It's not me, it's you."

The fifth video work, located at the far edge of the exhibition space, is *Manual Indication* (2005). The title of Kowner's exhibition is derived from this work's central motif - the number 15. In many ways, this work's symbolism is a kind of code for the entire exhibition - a theoretical infrastructure from which one may learn of Kowner's strategy regarding the perception of reality characterizing his work. *Manual Indication* consists of two monitors, each displaying a repeated image of a fist opening and closing three times - signifying the number 15. The basis for this simple action is connected to one of Kowner's memories. He recalls playing a game (of Chinese origin) with his relative, where each of the two players has to bet on a number, which is the projected sum of the number of fingers that both players choose to extend. The highest number one can bid is 20, a tally that can be reached if both players extend all ten of their fingers. Each player

has to take into account the number of fingers he himself plans to extend: 5 fingers (one palm), 10 fingers (two palms), or zero – if he intends to "show" two clenched fists to his partner. Since in this case the player does not intend to extend any fingers, the highest number on which he can bet is 10.

Kowner recalls that, playing with his relative, he knew that he wouldn't extend any fingers but still bet on a number which, in this case, became illogical – the number 15. This was, therefore, a sort of jest, an illusion which begs to indicate the presence of an unseen hand supposed to partake in the game, beyond its logical rules – a dimension that can't exist in the normative mathematical perception of reality, but is still present in the familiar and presupposed rules of the game. This signal, pointing to something that does not exist yet somehow does exist, can be perceived as a kind of theoretical code, which is linked to the way Kowner describes the segments of reality captured in his other works. Within the seemingly completely-familiar details of this reality exists a process of pointing to another dimension, simultaneously intimate and foreign, which is exposed in familiar environments. The simple, isolated physical gestures are narrowed down in this work to an even greater extent than that of a gesture that tells of a concealed and elusive dimension. Figuratively, the manual indication may be hinting at those hidden signals transmitted by the segments of reality displayed in the rest of the exhibition's works.

Next to these video works, the exhibition includes several stills. Though these stills focus on vistas rather than human gestures, they share a fundamental principle with the video works. These captures of urban scenery and photos of trees display a common, elusive thread between presence and absence, the seizing of a magic moment while roaming the city. *Wrapped Building* (2003) portrays an enormous canvas covering a wall. The canvas reflects the reddish tint of the sunset, which gives it an enchanted, hypnotizing look and underscores its shadowed creases, like pieces of an urban reality displayed as a sort of abstract painting. *Karei Deshe* (2003) sets a group of palm trees as a dark penumbra against a dusk purple-blue sky. *From My Window* (2004) – shot from Kowner's studio in Tel Aviv – shows the skyscraping skyline of the east of the city on a rainy day, just as sunlight breaches the clouds behind the camera. All these photos point to elements of objects expropriated from their simplicity, an isolated gesture of still life observed for a moment on an elusive dusk, a world of in-between briefly glimpsed.

In another still photo, *Helping* (2003), Kowner describes a fracture of urban existence

close in spirit to many of his video works. A man lies prostrate on his stomach on the sandy beach, while a woman bends above him, lightly touching his back, holding a cigarette in her hand. The soft and hazy light is reminiscent of the dusk hours. The photo can be interpreted simply as a soft touch of a woman, nonchalantly enjoying a cigarette, on the back of a man resting on a beach. But once again, the awkward position in which the man lies on the sand conveys an upsetting reality. Kowner points to a situation of distress, inasmuch as the photo simultaneously projects softness and a measure of grace - and perhaps some equanimity on the woman's part, as she holds the cigarette in an offhand manner that does not necessarily point to a dramatic moment in time. The audience may interpret this fragment of reality observed while wandering in the urban realm according to its wishes - a simultaneously soft and threatening reality, whose elusive gaps can be filled through the eyes of the observer. This "decisive moment" rife with intrinsic tension adequately reflects, in the most refined and distilled form, the spirit of Kowner's work and the nature of his camera's gaze.

¹ Gleber, Anke, *The Art of Taking a Walk* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 24, 29.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 57

³ *Ibid.*, p. 151.