

Guy Goldstein, *Once, a Beat, Second Heat*

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White Noise, Black Silence

Text by Avi Lubin

In 2008, while conducting research for the exhibition "Demons" at Bat Yam Museum of Contemporary Art,¹ Guy Goldstein visited the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków, where, while leafing through the *Auschwitz Album*, he stumbled upon a photograph of his grandmother standing on the ramp in Auschwitz. Goldstein was aware that such a photograph existed, and that following its discovery, his grandmother was called to testify in the Eichmann trial, but his first, accidental encounter with it in Kraków was a formative moment which gave rise to a series of works.

Goldstein was interested in the moment in which the photograph was taken, before and after the camera button was pressed by the SS man. Following that encounter he created *Eid ist Eid* (An Oath is an Oath, 2008)—a sound installation whose title was drawn from Eichmann's testimony in the Israeli court. In the center of the installation Goldstein situated an object: a black box (loudspeaker) whose front panel is covered with a Gobelin tapestry made by his grandmother. As a child, Goldstein used to imagine Donald Duck's figure hiding in the tree in the tapestry. In the installation, sound emanates from the tapestry, combining excerpts from his grandmother's testimony at the trial and from Eichmann's own testimony there, excerpts from the soundtrack of a James Bond film, and

Donald Duck's voice from a 1943 animated Walt Disney film, which served the American propaganda machine to ridicule the Nazi regime.

The work marked the beginning of Goldstein's ongoing engagement with medium transitions between image and text, sound and object; back and forth translation between form, color, and time; and the delicate relations between silence and noise. Goldstein returned to his grandmother's testimony, in which she recounts the moment documented in the photograph, and extracted a sentence from it: "The SS man came, took the little girl, and handed her to my mother... and the boy too... he took." Based on that fragment he conceived of a set of actions which deconstruct the sentence: initially he slowed it down to produce meaningless sound, white noise, in which all frequencies are simultaneously heard in maximum energy and volume, so that the human ear misses the wealth embedded in it. In *Loot 01* he played this "white noise" from a loudspeaker set opposite a glass window, which vibrated in response. He wanted to examine the transformation from image (photograph) to text (the content of the testimony) to sound (recording of the testimony) to object (the loudspeaker and the vibrating window) through these actions, as well as the interrelations between the noise that still echoes in his family (his grandmother's past) and the silence and masking which may be generated by the white noise. Indeed, the elimination of the testimony's content by transforming it into "white noise" resulted in relative silence, in comparison to the noise made by the encounter with the photograph and with his grandmother's testimony—the encounter with the trauma.

The noise of reality, however, prevailed over the white noise's silence, and repeatedly surfaced. In response, Goldstein repeated the aforesaid process twice more: in *Loot 02* he played a recording of *Loot 01* over a loudspeaker installed in a plastic garbage

bag and echoed in it, thus adding rustles which enhanced the masking effect. Next to the work he screened a documentation of *Loot 01*, to create a situation where the new process alluded to its own history, binding it within itself. Goldstein repeated this technique again in *Loot 03*, where he played the sound of *Loot 02* at a sheet of A4 paper bearing a printed image of a pencil. The fluttering page contributed yet another layer to the accumulating sound, while a video documentation of the first two phases was screened next to it. It was a failure foretold, however, because the trauma of the moment documented in the photograph, which has reverberated since then in Goldstein's family, breached the masking noise and the banal, quiet everyday quality of the objects selected for the work (a window, a plastic bag, a pencil printed on paper) each time anew.

Goldstein addressed white noise again in *Timetable* (2010), which consisted of disassembled radios which broadcast several stations simultaneously, to produce a rustling sound. The work debuted as part of the exhibition "Grandfather Paradox" which I curated at Chelouche Gallery for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv. One of the things that stood out upon entering the gallery, which was located in a public bomb shelter at the time,² was the disappearance of Arab-speaking stations. In various spots in the gallery, the ear could isolate specific stations from the overall noise and hear clearer sounds. On the hour the voices that emanated from the various sets merged as the news from the Army Radio (Galei Zahal) or from Kol Israel (The Voice of Israel) overcame the rustle, and enabled the noise (the news) to defeat the silence (the white noise).

In *Freigedank (Free Thinker)*,³ featured at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art in 2017, Goldstein employed a similar yet reversed mechanism. He installed twenty school chairs in the space which he disassembled and reassembled, and positioned an old

radio on each. Each of the radios was tuned to a different station, which played a different musical instrument, and together the transistors "played" the overture to Richard Wagner's early opera *Rienzi, der letzte der Tribunen* (*Rienzi, the last of the tribunes*, 1840). The libretto, also by Wagner, is rife with nationalist themes, later a source of inspiration for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. Goldstein also refers to Wagner in his chosen title, which derived from the pseudonym K. Freigedank (free thought), with which Wagner signed "Judaism in Music" ("*Das Judenthum in der Musik*")—an 1850 essay which played a crucial role in fostering nationalism and anti-Semitism in 19th-century Germany. The exhibition space was the only place in which the various radio broadcasts merged to play the work with all its elements. Goldstein thus reversed the relationship between private and public in Israel: Wagner's works, which some may listen to privately, are banned and seldom heard in the Israeli public sphere, whereas in this work by Goldstein, Wagner's piece may be heard in full only in the public sphere. By so doing, Goldstein pushed the silence forced on him away and reintroduced the noise (playing Wagner, with all the implications involved) into the public space.

Following the engagement with "white noise," Goldstein explored "the colors of noise" (gray, blue, pink, red, and purple noise)—a term based on analogy between the different lengths of sound waves and light waves. Blue noise, in which the higher frequencies are more dominant, was the first in the series. The series *Partitura for Blue Noise* (2013) was drawn in graphite on paper in various techniques (using electric drills and screwdrivers, masking tape to transfer drawn fragments from one surface to another, and so on) to produce drawn codes which constituted interpretations on composing music via image. In the next phase, the drawn images were converted to sounds using an ANS

synthesizer, a conversion based on the fact that both images and sounds are coded in the human brain into electric signals (the human brain does not perceive the color "blue," but rather a certain electric signal) and, in fact, share a common language.

In *Sounds like a Plan* (2013–14), an 8-meter long drawing—constructed as a score or a composition of musical notes written from left to right—was scanned and converted to sound, so that every meter was translated into one minute. The first meter was a gamble: it was drawn without knowing what it would sound like. Once the first meter was scanned and converted to sound, Goldstein began copying parts of the score using scraps of masking tape, so that each minute was divided into four bars, and the various instruments were represented by changing drawing textures and the use of variegated power tools such as drills and screwdrivers. Here too, he operated not as a scientist or a soundman, but rather immersed himself in the poetic meanings of the color blue (horizon, sky, sea) and introduced the blue noise as a possible source for the contemplation of silence. The color blue is missing from ancient works such as the bible or the *Iliad* since it was not considered a color in its own right in those cultures. In the past, scholars assumed this was due to evolutionary color blindness or a confusion between green and blue, but today the prevalent assumption is that it was due to a language and perception barrier. The blue thus serves Goldstein to contemplate the "semantic void" or the relationship between noise and silence.

A translation of the sound back to image was thus called for, and Goldstein created a series of black spectrograms using the synthesizer, like ghosts of the original drawings. This black series refers to pink noise, where (as opposed to blue noise) the low frequencies are more dominant. Pink is an optical illusion obtained in the gap between red

and purple, in a color gamut spanning only five differentiated hues: red, yellow, green, blue, and violet. When the spectrum is organized in a color wheel, a gap is left between red and violet. This is the interval between light waves which is invisible to the eye, and it is represented by pink. The location of the gap in the wheel (pink) opposite the color green and the fact that pink is, in fact, white light from which green was removed, has given it the nickname "minus green." This is also the title given by Goldstein to the series of spectrograms, after he framed them with UV glass and discovered that it refracted pink light from one angle, and green light from another.

In the next stage Goldstein decided to explore the meaning of noise for different people. To that end he traveled to Northern Ireland, to an artist residency in a 200-year old Curfew Tower—a quiet place which is nevertheless highly charged with countless noises of a political strife imbued with violence, resistance, and terror. He discussed the concept of noise with the locals: Catholics and Protestants, musicians and clergymen, a storyteller, an IRA member, and an ex-convict. Based on their different stories—about the civil war, about the infamous Maze prison, about ancient Irish customs, and the unique hurling sport—he created *Memorable Equinox*—a harmonious album which forms an antithesis to the "white noise." Recordings of the conversations he held in Northern Ireland were edited and intertwined with the album's songs, which he wrote and composed, and which accompany a 3-channel video installation entitled *Silence isn't Very Much*, which Goldstein created especially for the exhibition at Petach Tikva Museum of Art. The album's songs and the various images flickering on the screens deconstruct and reconstruct the stories over and over again, challenging the division between narrative and fragmented, harmonious and noisy.

The exhibition also features the piece *Theme Tonight...* (2017)—an independent production after Samuel Beckett's radio play *Words and Music* (1961). The participants in the play, which takes place in an indefinite time and an unidentified place (other than the tower mentioned in it), are Joe-Words and Bob-Music, who confront one another and clash with each other, but at moments also produce music or a meaningful song. The tension between plot advancement and the interruptions and interference returns us to the question which struck Goldstein when he encountered the photograph of his grandmother on the ramp in Auschwitz: Where is silence found? Is it the ability to see clearly, the harmony between "words" and "music," the differentiated text, and the clear plot—that create the silence? Or, perhaps it is rather the repeated interruptions and masking "noises" that allow for relative silence in reality?

Notes

1. Curators: Naomi Aviv and Leah Abir.
2. The exhibition was staged in the former space of Chelouche Gallery on Hissin Street, Tel Aviv.
3. The exhibition was staged on the occasion of Goldstein's receiving the Keshet Award for Contemporary Art; curator: Louis Grachos.