

SALA-MANCA: MEDIATING THE POETICS OF TRANSLATION

Jeffrey Shandler

Jewish artists working in new media frequently use the vantage provided by innovative technologies to look back as well as forward, making their work of special interest to Jewish studies scholars. Such is the case with *Pilim beleylot Metula* (*Elephants in the Nights of Metula*), performed by the group Sala-Manca at the Upgrade International, a festival of new media held at the Eyebeam Art and Technology Center, New York City, in September 2005. This remarkable piece, which combines live performers with digital slides, video, film, and animation, uses state-of-the-art technologies to explore the power of that oldest of communications media—speech—in a provocative meditation on language, territory, and the imaginary in Israel.

Sala-Manca (<http://sala-manca.net>) consists of two media artists, Lea Mauas and Diego Rotman, both natives of Buenos Aires, who have been living and working in Jerusalem since 2000. They have created a series of performance pieces, installations, and print publications, notably the journal (*H*)*Earat Shulaym*—(*Note in the Margin*), that engage an array of social and political issues of special relevance to life in contemporary Israel. In addition, their work investigates issues of art and communication generally, such as the interrelation of art and memory, the role of the artist in the community, the interrelation of low-tech and high-tech aesthetics, and

the poetics of translation—not only from one language to another, but also across cultures and media.

Such is the case with *Pilim beleylot Metula*, which is based on texts by the Israeli Yiddish poet Avraham Sutzkever. The piece, originally created for the

Metula Poetry Festival in 2005, consists of a richly textured montage of sounds and images that, to use Sala-Manca's own language, "recontextualizes" the poet within Israeli culture through a "postrealistic" approach. Most provocative is the piece's layering of languages through both live speech (performed by Mauas and Rotman) and graphic display on a large screen that dominates the performance space.

Yiddish and Hebrew texts are sometimes projected on the screen in peculiar romanization generated by Truespel, a "pronunciation guide spelling system" that renders any spoken language in an orthography based on a phonetic transcription of English. The effect is complex, calling one's attention not only to the poetics of translation but also to the slippage between spoken and written language, providing a sense of access to and, at the same time, estrangement from languages usually written in the Jewish alphabet. (Sala-Manca makes other deft uses of the poetics of translation in another version of *Pilim beleylot Metula*, in which Hebrew is written in Soviet Yiddish orthography). This strategy also reinforces the piece's interrogation of the place of Yiddish in Israel and

the implications of rethinking the possibilities of Jewish language(s) in relation to Jewish notions of place.

Yiddish figures as a provocative element in other media works created by Sala-Manca, including the group's participation in Kaleydoskop/Yiddish Avant-Garde, presented in Jerusalem in 2002. *Variations on Cultural Icons I*, which was originally staged in the city's streets during national elections, proposed Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem as an "alternative candidate," deploying the author's name as a "political propaganda" message that, as the artists explain, has "several meanings ('Peace on you,' 'Goodbye to you'). . . . Objects that are neglected in day-to-day life were disconnected from their natural context in order to find

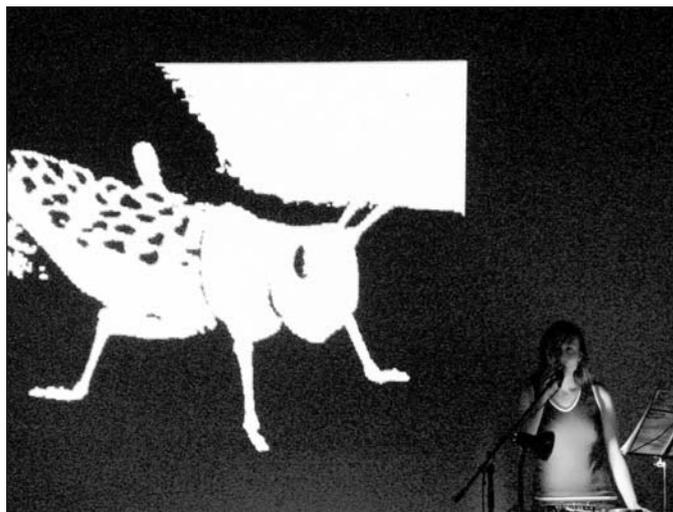


Photo credit: Sasha Alechov, *Metula*, 2005.

their new place at the side of the Yiddish writer. . . . The exhibition reconstructs these very objects and the cultural icon [of Sholem Aleichem] and sets them back in the center of the actual dialogue." *Tel Aviv 2002*, another work presented on this occasion, was a "performance for overhead projector and Yiddish texts" that dealt with "contemporary creation in Yiddish and the Israeli policy toward Yiddish Culture."

More recently, Sala-Manca has performed *Albatros 200X oder 200X*

Albatros (including a performance at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York in September 2005). This piece presents Yiddish texts by leading poets of the past century, including

approach to Yiddish using high-technology media is, in our eyes, a natural connection, a result of our way of reading the reality. This approach allows us also to break

culture of cutting-edge technology. Perhaps this is why they have dubbed their “new media study room,” which is designed to enable “active artists to share and achieve knowledge in an intimate and non-institutional frame,” the “New Media Cheyder.”

AT THE SAME TIME THAT ENGAGING WITH YIDDISH HAS A SUBVERSIVE ATTRACTION FOR SALA-MANCA, IT ALSO SEEMS TO BE APPEALINGLY ANACHRONISTIC, COMPLICATING AND ENRICHING THEIR COMMITMENT AS ARTISTS LIVING AND WORKING IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY ISRAEL, TO THE WORLDWIDE CULTURE OF CUTTING-EDGE TECHNOLOGY.

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Peretz Markish, A. Leyeles, Avraham Sutzkever, Uri-Zvi Grinberg, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, and Yankev Glatshteyn, as well as the performers’ original writing in Yiddish. *Albatros* honors these poets’ “revolutionary spirit by using cutting edge and experimental technology to process and re-use them as audio-visual material.”

Sala-Manca is attracted to Yiddish as a language of powerful symbolic value, emblematic of what I have termed elsewhere a “postvernacular” engagement with language.¹ As young Israeli Jews who grew up in Argentina (their first language is Spanish), Mauas and Rotman, like others of their generation, encounter Yiddish as a recovered cultural resource. Thus, the artists explain, *Albatros* deals with the efforts of “a young Hebrew poet named A. K. and his young friends, all of them new students of Yiddish language, who opened an Alternative Center for Yiddish Culture, Language and Literature.”

The alterity that Yiddish signifies opens up opportunities for Sala-Manca to interrogate prevailing assumptions about Jewish language, culture, and national identity. In an e-mail interview, they explain: “The

with the common grasp on Yiddish culture, showing that new ways of approaching Yiddish are possible and also necessary.” Essentially, they argue, this “is just a connection between two languages we deal with (Yiddish culture and ‘low/high technology’). In a lot of our work we . . . try to break the dichotomy and hierarchy between old and new, low technology and high technology, Yiddish and Hebrew, and so on.”²

At the same time that engaging with Yiddish has a subversive attraction for Sala-Manca, it also seems to be appealingly anachronistic, complicating and enriching their commitment as artists living and working in twenty-first-century Israel, to the worldwide

¹ Shandler, Jeffrey, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

² Interview with the author, January 7, 2006.

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