Yishay Garbasz, in conversation with Sarah Messerschmidt

In 2019 the scholar Achille Mbembe published the book *Necropolitics,* a radical extension of the Foucauldian principle of ‘biopower’; political force applied to the regulation and control of human populations. Mbembe’s theory develops this notion to suggest that political power in fact facilitates the preservation of the nation-state by way of exterminating its enemies, a repercussion of growing racist, nationalist and fascist tendencies worldwide, and a sinister feature of what he terms the ‘nocturnal body’ of democracy. Although the visual artist Yishay Garbasz insists that she does not knowingly apply political philosophy to her practice, elements of these theories echo loudly in her work, which deals in large part with barriers to human rights, as well as the inheritance of trauma and traumatic memory, and the complexities of identity.

Garbasz maintains a certain physical proximity to the artwork she produces. In some cases, she positions her own body at the centre of her artistic inquiry, as in works like *Becoming* (2010) and *Eat Me Damien* (2011) – the latter of which displays the artist’s severed testicles suspended in a tank of formaldehyde, a wry take on Damien Hirst’s shark tank experimentations – both of which attend to Garbasz’s own changing body during and after her gender affirmation surgery. In others, she uses her body as a vessel with which to ‘bear witness’, as she says, to subjects outside of herself, looking towards places where injustice systemically festers: sites of disaster, border zones, industries which exclude trans women – notably, the art industry, something which Garbasz is resolutely vocal about. In particular, Garbasz maintains an incisive focus on the notion of ‘othering’, investigating in recent work the function of the state in producing and reinforcing xenophobic conceptions of the other in order to advance nationalist agendas. She contends that a fear of the other manifests most visibly at borders, which effectively delegitimise certain kinds of bodies, thereby laying the groundwork for systems of violence and oppression.

In conversation with Garbasz, the connections between her early work, notably *In My Mother’s Footsteps* (2004–2009) and *Becoming* (2010), which examine trauma and identity from personal, albeit also cultural and historical perspectives, to her more recent photographic work, including the meticulous documentation of three highly contentious border zones in *Severed Connections: Do what I say or they will kill you* (2003–2015), becomes clear. What is consistent in her practice is a centring of the corporeality of xenophobia: the ways in which populations are physically vulnerable to control, and how trauma is inscribed on the body. In much of Garbasz’s work, she participates in the preparation of her subject matter, whether following step for step the harrowing path of her mother’s route through the Holocaust, rigorously documenting her own gender affirmation surgery,

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1. This concept was first published by Mbembe in a 2003 essay of the same name: Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture,* Vol 15, Issue 1, Winter 2003, pp 11–40
or travelling to restricted areas in order to photograph them. These actions suggest a transgressing of borders – those drawn around gender, for instance, or the borders separating entire societies of people – in an apparent dissolving or queering of such boundaries where discrimination and oppression thrive.

Sarah Messerschmidt: Yishay, you are often described as a photographer.

Yishay Garbasz: Yes. I actually studied dance and photography at Bard College, but my work has evolved into an interdisciplinary practice, and actually what I would prefer to be called is an art worker, rather than an artist, because what I do is work. It is a lot of fucking work.

SM: There is certainly a performative element to what you do. But in terms of how you use photography, what is it about that medium in particular that allows you to communicate your ideas?

YG: I use large format photography, so it is mostly 4” x 5”, but also 8” x 10” when I can borrow one. I studied with Stephen Shore, who is a very good teacher and who taught me a certain discipline in terms of learning how to see outside myself. So, really, photography is a discipline. The camera is a tool, it is not the goal. Photographs are a product of that. I learnt to write at age 25, and I went to college at 30. I am very dyslexic, and I learnt to survive by being creative; while other
people could memorise multiplication tables, it was necessary for me to engineer situations to suit my abilities.

SM: I want to turn first to ‘Ritual and Reality’, an exhibition you produced in 2014, because this year (2021), in March, marks ten years since the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan. The way in which you approach that as a subject matter is very much about what cannot be seen. They are not peopled images in ‘Ritual and Reality’; there is a lot of emptiness. While you are not a photojournalist or frontline reporter, you often address areas where human rights have been somehow violated, or where there has been overwhelming disaster. I see a deliberate stylistic choice: an absence becomes an overwhelming presence, and through that there is a lot of suggestion. What motivated you to depict Fukushima in this way?

YG: There are people in some of the Tokyo images. But there is an issue with disaster porn, which is the first thing anyone sees after a disaster. It is a cheap form of voyeurism and exoticism. I am very much against provoking the titillation that comes from showing the immediate effects of disaster. I went to Fukushima out of a sense of obligation: I have many close friends in Japan, and I felt responsible to them. But how does one photograph trauma? For instance, in Berlin, where I live, there are so many intricate and layered traumas in the city, and they are palpable. But they are not as easy to depict as something that is on fire. Even the wreckage of a fire is easy. Once the wreckage is gone, representation becomes challenging. But this is an interesting place to make art.

SM: What becomes veiled in catastrophe seems also to be one of the reasons ‘Ritual and Reality’ resonates today, because you make quite an astute observation about the connections between human-led disasters and so-called natural disasters. For instance, in the way the state manages crises, which you argue should not simply be in the aftermath. What you suggest is that there is a lot that underlies disaster, that there are structural issues, things perhaps not always blatant or obvious.

YG: I could speak about this for a week. There are two points: firstly, there are fundamental issues with Fukushima, and it is not just the government, it is also the corporations, because we cannot unlink Fukushima from capitalism. TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company)’s bureaucrats, the people in charge of the TEPCO corporation, were out of the country with their families when the nuclear disaster happened, while everyone else was warned after the tsunami. The reason TEPCO was so slow to put salt water into the reactors was because they were trying to preserve the machines for later. They were managing their wealth, so to speak. The engineer who eventually injected seawater into the reactors died of cancer. He gave his life and disobeyed orders, which is very hard to do in Japan, in order to save everybody else. It is not an exaggeration, because radiation could have easily spread to Tokyo. Secondly, there has to be a culturally specific understanding of Fukushima, because Japan is, of course, different from the West. And so photographing people, for instance, has greater complexities. You need consent to photograph people anywhere, but in Japan a Western person asking to photograph people in sites of trauma is problematic. Re-exposing people to trauma without providing any support to help them afterward is also problematic. I don’t need
people in my photographs in order to do my work, and going to certain places to work is based on my personal history with those places, otherwise why should I go? What do I bring uniquely to a place? Otherwise I am just a travel photographer.

My reason for travelling to Japan is that I work with notions of culturally specific trauma, and to that work I bring a more nuanced understanding than most. Although it is important for me to still challenge my preconceptions: is it ethical that I go to this place to do this? How will it benefit my career? How will it benefit others? As a queer and trans person, and as a woman, my community – specifically the community of trans women – is perceived and understood largely from the artwork of others. Berlin shows artwork about trans women, but it rarely shows the artwork of trans women. And I mean trans women doing art about anything. As a minority you are expected to make art about your identity: queer art is about being queer, trans art is about being trans, etc. To me, that is a form of colonisation. I want to see exhibitions by trans artists working on the Bauhaus school, anything, because we will learn so much more than the other way around.

In about 2010 I took part in my first and only biennale, and it was an utter disaster. I got nothing from it. I knew the curator from my time working in Japan, where ironically I am a more recognised artist than in the West. Things were difficult for me at the time, so I sent an email to the curator asking him for help to show my work in a gallery. I was specifically talking about In My Mother’s Footsteps, which is about the inheritance of traumatic memories of the Holocaust from my mother. And he suggested I research Bruce LaBruce’s gallery because they deal with ‘speciality’ artworks.
To him, my vagina is so powerful that nothing else about me was visible. And that is the story of being a minority. You know, it is like being fat. It is an ongoing joke in the fat community that you go to a doctor with a broken arm and they will advise you to lose weight. That is all they can see. But it is not my identity that is a problem. It is theirs. Conventional identities are so fragile and inflexible. That is the problem.

SM: Identity as a concept seems to factor into your later work, Severed Connections: do what I say or they’ll kill you (2003–2015), which presents a view into three quite hostile border zones. It is a very potent title. Can you elaborate on this project?

YG: I am really bad at titles. This project was over ten years in the making, and I started with the Israeli-Palestinian separation barrier. People have very strong opinions about it, and landscape is a very strong photographic and artistic visual language. So I just went there and catalogued, trying through landscape to find what was actually there. The project did not really come into focus until I came to the DMZ (demilitarised zone) and the Northern Limit Line between North and South Korea, the 4 km buffer zone both on land and several nautical miles out into the sea. It is the most heavily fortified stretch of land in the world, and it is now a restricted military zone. Army controlled. It is heavily mined by the Americans, the Chinese and the Koreans themselves, and the South Korean part is actually occupied by multinational forces, including the US. It is basically UN territory administered by South Korea. I had a residency on Baengnyeongdo Island through the Incheon Art Platform, which is 15 km from North Korea and approximately 200 km from mainland South Korea. I spent three months on the island, and six more on a different residency in Seoul at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art.
I studied the island because the island is fenced and mined, and it holds most of South Korea’s missile arsenal. People live on this 52 km² island; it is a large military base also inhabited by farmers. The best food is actually grown in or near the DMZ and the restricted islands near the Northern Limit Line; because there is such a limited population, there is so little pollution. There are a few legacy villages in the DMZ that are not trusted by either side; they are called peace villages, and they are, ironically, in the minefield. Small numbers of farmers live there, but they have a curfew of 4 or 5 pm every night. If the army sees you, they shoot you. But they have great food. It is the best food in South Korea. As a matter of fact, there was a lawsuit between two companies over the brand name DMZ Water, because the water itself is so pure. It is this insane thing: the best rice grows in rice paddies that border the minefields, the best rice you can get.

There is a density of information to these experiences. Baengnyeongdo, for instance, is both beautiful and dangerous. It is the most beautiful island I have ever been on, but it is full of war. And it is so restricted. So, how did I get to calling the work Severed Connections? This really comes from queer theory, although I am not an academic; I don’t read theory. But I used this principle to look at otherness as a dehumanising construct, and to understand what happens in Israel, Korea, as well as my third point which was Belfast. You see, Netanyahu won his election by using fear at the time that I made the project. He has used it again, but then he used fear of the other as a way of leveraging for votes. This becomes even clearer when you compare him to the South Korean politician, Ms Park (Jung-hyun), who used Twitter to create fear of North Koreans. She also made use of the island, and two smaller islands near it, by giving the army a larger quota of ammunition each month, which they are obliged to shoot in order to maintain their budget.
So if their ammunition is increased, the amount they have to shoot is also increased. There was a lot of shooting going on on the island.

**SM:** Where does Belfast factor in? How did you end up there?

**YG:** Again, I applied for a residency there. I just didn’t explain exactly what I would be doing, which was the same story going to Korea. The Troubles are still very present in Belfast, it is such a deep and long history. The height of the peace lines – large walls that separate Catholics and Protestants, Unionists and Loyalists, the British and the Irish, however you want to look at it – is to protect against projectiles, and most were erected, in fact, after the peace agreement. Comparing these three different sites, I realised that in many ways they are so similar.

**SM:** What you seem to convey is that population control is executed in sometimes invisible and often quite sinister ways, and that border zones can be like blank spaces, where citizenship is ambiguous.

**YG:** Yes, and the blank spaces have another usage. A wall or a fence is a very specific type of border. It is a single dimensional line of defence, which is never successful. Historically speaking, any side that has erected a wall as defence has lost: Hadrian’s wall in the UK, the Maginot line in France, the Great Wall of China. All of these walls ultimately failed, because walls are not sustainable. The sustainable strategy is defence and depth. You occupy the hilltops, slow the enemy
down, counter attack with mobile troup. That is warfare distilled. So why these walls? It is related to invisibility and blank spots. They are built to create a fear of the other. You hide the other, you hide your atrocities. Just as behind closed doors, you can create fear around what cannot be seen up close. You can then create whatever narrative you want.

**SM:** Was it necessary to secure permission to visit and document these zones?

**YG:** Let’s put it this way, not getting caught is really great. But it is never easy making this work, and I have had some scary experiences. We can talk about Fukushima. Berlin and Tokyo are sister cities, so I had access as an exchange artist through the Berliner Senat. I was therefore technically part of the Berlin Metropolitan Government, which meant that I could file paperwork as the Metropolitan Government to gain access to the exclusion zone. I made really good use of that privilege. And if you are fully decked out in the protective gear, no one can really see who you are. It is easy to perform legitimacy.

In Korea, I performed cute femininity to get out of situations with police: you know, ‘Thank you strong policeman, you are so brave. It’s very nice to make your acquaintance, policeman.’ I have used this to my advantage more than once. Nail polish is a good prop. It’s not heavy, but it’s very femme, so it works. What they assume about me hinders them from seeing what I am actually doing, or for understanding the full scope of what I am doing.

**SM:** The border as a conceptual theme runs as a thread through a lot of your work, expressed plainly through the physical architecture of borders, designed to keep populations apart, but also in psychological or abstract borders. You touched on this with the reference to queer theory and the concept of otherness as a social construct. In this vein, gender might be considered an abstract border or boundary, which you challenge in a work like *Eat Me Damien*.

**YG:** Men don’t like that one. I don’t know why, but the men, they don’t like it. It makes it so much more fun. Most men are uncomfortable with it, but that is an extra bonus. Women see it and just laugh, but men look at it and leave and don’t talk about it.

Part of my work has to do with trauma. In order to see outside my body I need to clean the mirror inside of me; that is part of the practice. In my art career I first needed to deal with my own narrative, you know, with *Footsteps* and *Becoming*, projects that deal with gender – those are part of my story. But at a certain point, there came an obligation based on that foundation that I have to bear witness to others. Once you start dealing with yourself, you are obliged to look outward.

I don’t necessarily think of borders so much when I am working, but they are interesting places. A lot of the violence we commit as a society happens at borders, or behind closed doors. Those are the two main places we do violence. And both of them are secret in the same manner. They are two blind spots in our psyche. There is a parallel invisibility to border zones and behind closed doors.

I don’t read much theory. I read a little bit, but I am more interested in talking to different people who are on the ground in different areas – artists, but mostly non-artists. And I like being on the ground, on the ‘front lines’, because that is something I can do, that feels more honest. When I look back on my work, theory makes sense, but I don’t necessarily know what I am doing as I do it.
SM: The physical body plays a large role in your work as well, and it is incredible that you use large format cameras to take photographs, given that you spend so much of your time on foot. That is to say, you walk in order to approach your subject matter. It suggests a transgressing of borders – that you are, in a way, going to physical places and invading them. Is walking a solitary activity?

YG: It is about integrating; when you walk you are also integrating. If you are in a car, you miss so much. Yes, I walk a lot. I don’t have a smartphone. I use a map and I walk. I ask for help. I am dependent on other people. It’s not a bad thing; it’s interdependency. Walking is very slow, but it also suits my personality. You always have to work with your personality, and personally I like to walk. Walking makes the work my own. I carry this heavy suitcase on wheels behind me, and I just walk. It is hard, and it is dangerous sometimes, but you also learn to analyse dangers, to work with them. I have trained with dancers before on expression through body language, because I am very bad at spoken language. I use an ability to read other peoples’ body language, segmenting movements into a vocabulary, and I use that to communicate. This is my way; it is how I have learnt.

SM: In terms of a physical practice, you recently participated in a triathlon in Berlin. Is this an ongoing project?

YG: Unfortunately not; I got too many injuries. But it was a great project. Triathlon is a very technical and challenging sport. And I assume it is a queer sport because for each phase there are different types of lubes. Anyway I really liked it, although it is such a classist sport. And if you go to an event, it is a sea of sameness and whiteness. I had a hard time telling people apart. But that is
also the best place for them to encounter my body. Because I am fat, and I am trans and – no more fucks. It is a great point in a woman’s life when you don’t give any more fucks, because then you can begin calling things out. So, it is a good experience for them. It is not about my body. It is not trans art about being trans. It is about a group of people all doing the same thing, and me standing out simply by not being like them.

**SM:** So there were other people participating with you?

**YG:** When I did it, as far as I could see I was the only trans woman doing triathlons in Germany. But it is very classist. You need a lot of money, even just for food. You need to eat more, and you need higher quality food. You train six days a week, sometimes twice a day. Twelve hours a week is normal. You need specialised equipment that you can’t buy in Germany. While the advice to fat people is to go to the gym, a fat person can’t even buy technical sports clothes here. They have to come from America. It was in this context that I learned that the magic of fat is the same as the magic of my vagina. But the problem with that is not within me.

**SM:** Another place you examine borders are the ones drawn around the art industry. And indeed, there is quite a fortified perimeter around art to maintain hierarchies of power: who is visible, who makes money. You are vocal about the exclusion of trans women in the art world, particularly in Berlin. Can you say more about this?

**YG:** I keep telling the story about *In My Mother’s Footsteps*, which was shown at the Busan Biennale in 2010, at the Miami Art Fair and in New York City, but never in Germany. I have been living in Berlin for thirteen years now. The *Footsteps* book came out in 2009, yet the work has not been shown here. After ten years, I know it just won’t be shown, but it is not because I have not tried. It is a powerful work, and there has to be a lot of aftercare when showing such a body of work. How it doesn’t translate to the German context, I don’t know. I want answers, but I have also stopped giving a fuck. After ten years I know the German art world won’t change its mind about me, so I can really speak my mind and be good with myself – and be good to myself.

But museums have entire archives that exclude all kinds of narratives. That is why my work has not been shown in Israel, or in the UK either. I hold Israeli and British passports, except for the nine months in 2019 that I did not have citizenship because I am trans – and yes, that is completely illegal. Laws are made for the ‘good people’. The ‘bad people’ are not deserving of protection. You see this in the US. People on the right can literally murder people and get away with it. But left-wing protestors who sneeze on the sidewalk get full charges. The laws are made for the ‘good’ people, the ‘clean’ people. And there are ‘dirty’ people, those with minority status. ‘Dirty’ people can also be traitors – gender traitors, army traitors, etc. Thank god for whistle blowers. ‘Traitor’ is such a wonderful honorific for a person.

**SM:** And again, that brings things back to the idea of transgressing boundaries: to locate or identify a boundary and to step over it.
YG: Boundaries are just in our own minds. But why is it this way? And we are unconscious of it. Sometimes there is a good reason for a boundary, but many times there isn’t. This is the thing with laws – I mean, laws are supposed to protect. The US has anti-discrimination laws. How can there be racism if there are anti-discrimination laws? But the horrible thing about this law is that it takes the viewpoint of the perpetrator. In order to prove discrimination, you have to take the viewpoint of the perpetrator and show that they discriminated based on a particular characteristic. Unlike systemic issues, which are easier to prove based on statistics, this is usually impossible to prove.

Berlin only recently implemented an anti-discrimination law – but the law has a catch, which is that it cannot be used against government employees. The Berlin example is the Job Centre. I get money from the Job Centre. I was always misgendered by one of the agents there, and since I could not change agents, there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn’t even sue them because as a government employee they are protected. I even got an Ärztlcher Test, because I had panic attacks caused by [the misgendering]. And I am in a relatively good position, because I was able to get a test. You know, refugee stories are so much more horrific. The laws protect those they are meant to protect. But those who are not protected are the ones we need to protect; it is an impossible circle. That is why we say ‘abolition’. Some things cannot be fixed. And if you don’t ask ‘is it worthwhile to fix this system’, you will never succeed because you have to critically think, ‘this system is bad’. The first question is, ‘how much work is it to build the system anew?’ And then, ‘is it worth it?’ You have to weigh those up, and that is not being done. The only prescribed route is reform, but reform has not worked. So: abolition.

\[4\] A doctor’s test
SM: Something that is difficult to miss about some of your images is that many of the landscapes are very beautiful. For example, you took a photo of a machine gun nest in a green field that overlooks the ocean.

YG: Actually, it overlooks a minefield. And then there are dragon’s teeth to stop the boats, but it is not so clear to see.

SM: Exactly. Some of these potentially very violent places are difficult to interpret as being places that could harm the body, as places that are nefarious. They are beautiful. It is very appealing to be near the blue ocean, if you didn’t know where it was.

YG: Yes, some places are gorgeous. Baengnyeongdo has such good air and water quality. Part of the beauty in my photos is deliberate. I do love beauty – that is my modernist aesthetic in photography. But on the other hand, beauty is a tool, because if an image is beautiful people will look at it. Beauty creates more layers. We are not accustomed to having nuanced understandings. We are trained to understand good versus evil, and it is never that. There are certainly things that are good and bad, things we can say no to, but narratives need to be multilayered and nuanced. We need to understand issues as complex. That is the problem with white feminism. It erases things outside of it, but that just erases everything in total. There needs to be a dirty, complicated, nuanced, intersectional understanding of issues; they cannot be separate. We don’t have the time to deal with things one at a time, and historically that tactic has never worked so there is no reason why it will work now. And the only way to learn this is by centring minority voices.
A problem that you often see is that people reach for the microphone because they are close to it, instead of first turning back to see if there is someone behind them more qualified to speak. And it is hard because men do it automatically, so as a woman you struggle to do it, but you still need to look both ways. You need to look forward and backwards. You see a lot of white feminism in Berlin in the art scene; it is so bad. The Frauen Museum, for example – if you are running out of white women to see in Berlin, go there. From the Museum’s own perspective, it is diverse, but they have never shown a trans woman. Some women get killed on the street for being themselves, but that doesn’t include these women. They are always looking forward because they challenge everything that is stopping them, instead of looking back and seeing who they left behind. If you bring somebody from behind, they will have a wider perspective that also includes you. For example, if we took care of a minority group that is still excluded from the Berlin art world – poor women – that would take care of all women. If you take care of poor women of colour, who have disabilities, or of trans street-based sex workers, you will support everyone. It is not like, ‘Well let us gain power and we’ll reach our hand behind us.’ No.

**SM:** Yes, exclusion of intersectional perspectives is certainly still an issue in art.

**YG:** And just because you are used to grabbing the microphone doesn’t mean you should, but it also doesn’t mean you shouldn’t. It means you should be conscious of where you are positioned in relation to the microphone. We are not trained for that. I don’t blame the schools, because the schools are there to keep everything quiet and normal. I mean, half the population wants everything to return to ‘normal’ after the pandemic. Well, less than half. Normal was never good. And the younger generation is now footing the bill for the older generation’s extravagant living. This relates, in a way, to *Severed Connections*, because that project, in particular, really looks at fear of the other. I had no idea what I was doing when I was making it, I didn’t have answers. The answer I did not expect to find was a fear of the other, or a weaponising of a fear of the other. In order for many issues not to exist separately, we need to challenge the fear of the other. And really seeing other people is the way to fight fear.

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**Yishay Garbasz** is an interdisciplinary artist based in Berlin. Her work considers culturally specific inheritance of traumatic memory, rendering the unsightly and the invisible tenderly seen. She studied photography with Stephen Shore at Bard College between 2000 and 2004, and received the Thomas J Watson Fellowship in 2004/05. Her work has been exhibited in several cities internationally, including Tokyo, Seoul, New York, Miami, Boston, Busan, Paris and London, and she is featured in the Phaidon publication, *Great Women Artists* (2019). She is a recipient of the 2021 Kunstfonds Arbeitsstipendium.

**Sarah Messerschmidt** is a critic and researcher based in Berlin. Her writing has been published by the *Burlington Contemporary Journal*, *Ocula, Another Gaze* and *MAP*, and she is currently a resident of the Maumaus ISP in Lisbon.