

Michal Heiman: The Selfportraits in the Mirror

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1.0 Intro:

In this essay I want to analyze and research the self-portraits of Michal Heiman (1954 Tel Aviv) she took in the mirror. She is a prominent Israeli artist and lives and works in Tel Aviv. Heiman was educated as a photographer at the Hadassah College Jerusalem (1978-9) and studied for teacher at the Art Studies, State Art Teachers Training College (1991-1993). At the moment she works as a teacher at a few different places: The Hamidrasha School of Art, the Department of Art History the Tel Aviv University and at the M.A. Interdisciplinary Program, Faculty of Arts, and the Advanced Studies Psychotherapy Program, Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University.¹ Her work is internationally shown in museums and galleries. It was shown recently in the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven the Netherlands, where I saw it for the first time in the exhibition “*De principes van verzamelen - Het verzamelen van principes*”

The main question in this essay will be: why is Heiman depicting herself so much in her own art works, especially together with other women and in combination with mirrors and cameras? I want to analyze three of these self-portraits in the mirror. In the first paragraph I want to look at the artist, what is here background and what are here main themes and subjects? I shall follow this by analyzing the three artworks. I shall conclude in the last part.

For over two decades Heiman has been formulating new relations between the object of art, the subject and speech, developing exchange relations between the practice of art and that of the psychoanalysis. She wants through her work to investigate herself, the spectator, and the artists she is using in her work. The main reason I personally like her artwork so much, is because I'm a photographer myself too, but also a teacher and an artist and a mother like Heiman herself. And I have been in therapy myself for many years (like Heiman). I had a very nice personal interview with her on the phone, and also interviewed Gallit Allat curator from the Van Abbe Museum. Gallit knows a lot about Heiman's work and knows her personal, curated her art works in the group exhibition in the Van Abbe Museum in 2010.

You can read Heiman's work in many different ways; it is very personal how you make your interpretation or read her work. I will do my best to be objective in my readings, but it will also be my own personal opinion. Each piece of her work contains multiple layers and meanings. I also used the book *Camera Lucida*, from the writer and philosopher Roland Barthes to think deeper about her work.

2.0 Michal Heiman's art works and themes

Heiman's art works are mostly about photography in a conceptual way: reproductions of old paintings, newspaper pictures and pictures from family albums. They are all material for her to make new art-works. But she works also with found pictures and her own photos she took in her beginning of her own photographic

¹ From the CV of her website: <http://michalheiman.wordpress.com>

carrier. Heimans works also a lot with memory and the concept of remembering, the cultural memory of the western viewer, but also the personal memory of the viewer. Especially the visual memory. There is always a therapeutic aspect in her work and she thinks that photography, art and film are a kind of therapy. Heiman went in therapy herself a lot and I think she got a lot of inspiration from that for her works of art. She has a very long love-hate relationship with psychoanalysis and all these kind of complexities². She uses her own art as a therapy, and wants to make the spectator think about the images she made and want to bring him or her to new ideas. She looks at images and tries to analyse them. She develops a kind of way to analyze an image. And she looks to Europe and the relation to Western art history.

Michal Heiman thinks that there is a similarity between the photographer and the model and the therapist and the patient. There is also a similar situation with a journalistic interview: the interviewer and the subject. If you take a picture of somebody as photographer you 'take' something from him or her, she said. The therapist and patient are in the same situation; the doctor uses his patient for his research and publishes something about him or her 'problems'. Similar with a journalistic interview, you keep asking questions and use it for your own publication.³ In all these situations one is asking questions and the other is answering. Heiman said, 'questions they look innocent, like someone is interested, but in the same time it is also a very difficult situation'.⁴ In an interview with Azoulay she said: 'Again a relationship between two people, creating states, gaps, strong sensations, and all sorts of phenomena reminiscent of a process of therapy, a situation of a table and two chairs, with one asking questions and another answering- in a photograph, in video, in film, in recording, in a journalistic interview, in a work interview, in a test. A situation producing ambivalent feelings- in the subject as well as in the examiner- and containing sadomasochist elements as well as that sense of watching and being watched'⁵

She has an ambivalent feeling with doing photography herself. In conversation I had with Heiman she described to me how difficult it is working with this 'intolerable' instrument; 'let me describe to you what this instrument is to me: it has to be insured because it's always getting lost, it always get scratched, always requires repair. It is heavy and a studio is needed. Besides, I've never managed to understand exactly how to measure light, and therefore I work with lights stationed in the same place, so that I'll know the right exposure in advance. A nightmare. But ultimately, in most cases the lens and equipment haven't prevented me from conveying exactly what I wanted. This is what I carried inside me, and I had to give presence to this burden by means of the camera. So I don't use the camera so much anymore. I prefer to use a photo I

² Supplement page 2 Gallit Allat interview 2010

³ Supplement page 4 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

⁴ Supplement page 4 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

⁵ Azoulay a conversation page 6 1999

find somewhere. I just use photography in a way, like some who use to take photographs could do. I understand the medium very well.⁶

Heimans art works contributes, photography, installations, painting, ready mades. She sees the museum a place for learning, talking, communication and discussions. She research philosophy, psychoanalysis, art history, politics, and gender debate through her artworks. Heiman likes to ask the spectator simple question like a therapist is doing with his patient.⁷ “What did you see?” “What are you thinking?” “What didn’t you see?” “What’s on your mind?” But the questions gain in complexity when juxtaposed against images that are original, found, or found and modified. But also simple lines like “I was there” Heiman thinks the museum is a place for learning, talking, communication and discussion. Using these photographs and paintings as backdrop, Heiman incorporates text and her own portrait to create new meanings. The result is a fusion of past and present, word and image. As a result, they lend themselves to multiple readings, encouraging the viewer to give free space to do his or her imagination.

Her artwork has a lot to do with the archive. Each time she has exhibited her work, Heiman has returned to these questions, examining them through the framework of the archive that she began in the 1980s. This is an active archive, and she continues to collect images and photographs from various places: photographs from family albums, reproductions of canonical works of art (Goya, Degas, or Duchamp), canonical works of photography (Muybridge, Claude Cahun, Nan Golding, and Cindy Sherman), and those of unknown photographers (sorted and labeled “PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN”). But also photographs that she herself had taken the time she used to work for the press (such as the series What’s on Your Mind? From 1984-1985). The archive provides the framework in which Heiman handles her photographs. She not only performs technical manipulations (Photoshop), but she borrows the techniques of therapeutic and psychoanalytic places in order to communicate with spectators, along with photographed persons and photographers.

Mostly in her work she links one object (photo ore painting) to an other, and attacks it to make you think. This attacking and linking aspect she took it from the famous therapist Wilfred Bion (1897 1979) which work she adores. It is like a baby how attacks his mother with crying, she explained me in the conversation I had with here recently; it is an attack from the inside. Heiman herself is attacking the artworks.⁸ She wants to put things together and then attack it with words (stamps). Or separate them; so the spectator can make a new space to think, create new connections, possibilities and new thoughts. By

⁶ Supplement page 5 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

⁷ Supplement page 4 Interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

⁸ Supplement page 3 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

putting her self-portrait in a famous artwork is also an attack.⁹ She wants to investigate: what is happening in our head, how do we look? How do we make connection? How can you disturb an image? What do we remember? Heiman wants all the time to transform the image. She attacks the image from the outside (by asking questions to us in stamps), as from inside to put herself in to the image. A camera is also an attacker like Susan Sontage wrote in here book *On Photography*, a camera can be aggressive, and it can feel aggressive when you are being photographed.¹⁰ So if she is inside the artwork with her camera pointed at the spectator, it feels like the spectator is attacked by Heiman herself. Michal Heiman does not take photo's herself anymore, she only uses here archive for here new works, except for the self-portraits she took in the mirror. These days she uses a lot the computer program Photoshop to create her artworks she explained to me in an interview I had with here in December 2010.¹¹

A constant factor in here work is the mirror. Her passion for the mirror is very old, as a child she already was fascinated by the mirror. In conversation with Ariella Azoulay in 1999 she said: 'in my parents bedroom was a closet with a full-length mirror, the only one in the house. It was narrow and tall. I liked to stand in front of it and so did my father. I was fascinated by the way he'd put on a special face in front of mirrors. 'I'm watching the one who is watching', my work is a lot about subject- mirror relationship. Ones I was very young, a mirror saved my live. Many years later, visiting some friends in New York, I went to their bathroom, where I performed the familiar ritual of washing my hands while looking in the mirror. I looked in the mirror, but this time it couldn't help me. I saw the mirror cracked into thousand fragments and my face in pieces. I was very scared a month later I went into therapy'.¹²

In the interview I had with the artist she told me that the self-portrait in the mirror was for her the only possibility to put herself inside an other photo or painting. If she took her self-portrait in the mirror, the only possibility was that here camera was there too. By doing that (taking a self portrait in the mirror) she can put herself inside the famous pictures or paintings of the Western art history. She wants to know how it feels to be inside the artwork she said. And she explained that she was the first one who did this.¹³ This aspect gives the spectator the suggestion that she was the witness of the scene and also that she was there.

Photography is also a mirror; there is a real mirror inside the photo camera. In that sense Heiman and her camera are the mirror of the spectator. I personal think when a photographer takes a portrait; every portrait is in a certain way a self-portrait. There is always an interaction between the photographer and the

⁹ Supplement page 3 Interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

¹⁰ Sontage, p.13

¹¹ Supplement page 6 Interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

¹² Azoulay a conversation page 3 1999

¹³ Supplement page 1 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

model. Heiman told Azououlay in a conversation that when she was taking pictures of her father in the past, he gave her the idea of recording her father's trancelike gaze, as if he's looking in the mirror. In fact he was reflecting her as a mirror, she was reflecting light to him, and the photograph almost becomes a self portrait'¹⁴

Heiman is also a very curious artist: she loves to watch through the eyes of others.¹⁵ This watching through the eyes of others is also shown in the psychological test she presents in the museums, "The Michal Heiman Tests". An other aspect of that form is she likes to work with masks pretending she is somebody else. In the psychological test I did in the Van Abbe museum, the 'M.H.T number 4', I had the feeling that she was watching me because there was a video camera from above recording everything. I knew that later on in Tel Aviv she would watch my test. In the test I had to give my opinion on pictures they showed me, pictures of people. In that sense she is archiving how people look at images: in the way they analyze them. In a sense she was the mirror of my opinion at that moment; a recording mirror. It is also her intense desire to unite with here surroundings and to look at the world together.

Michal Heiman plays with the role of the; photographer, the spectator, or the photographed person. But as the spectator you feel also watched by the artist because she aims a camera at you, placed inside the art works. She puts the gaze back at you, she is watching you and she is the witness of the spectator here and now.

Here work is highly political engaged because she attacks Freud on the female hysteria in the Freud and Katherina installation she made.¹⁶ This is more the psychoanalysis direction of here work, like the tests that she made. An other political theme is the Israelian Palestine conflict she uses in her work, Heiman is pro Palestine.¹⁷ Themes who keep coming back in her work are; duality, pairs and contrasts. Like truth and fiction, photographer and model, viewer and subject, therapist and patient, red and green, past and present, constructive and destructive. But also; male and female, conscious and subconscious. Other important themes are disasters and saving and helping people. And also giving the voiceless a voice: like the 'Unknown Photographers', but also the 'Lying Woman' and Katharina from Freud. Heiman brings Katherina back to live in here video installation and let Katherine tell here story again using her photo as a mask.

Her work it is always about family. ¹⁸ She makes her own family; she calls them here extended family,

¹⁴ Azoulay a conversation page 1 1999

¹⁵ Azoulay a conversation page 3 1999

¹⁶ Suppelement page 3 Gallit Allat interviewu

¹⁷ Suppelement page 3 Gallit Allat interview

¹⁸ Suppelement page 3 Gallit Allat interview, 2010

like Diana Arbus, Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin.¹⁹ But she works also a lot with her own family like here mother in law. One aspect of the family is the mother aspect, especially the protecting and the holding aspect. She is a mother herself of two sons.²⁰ And of course her work is almost always about the female gender. Gallit Allat said in an interview that this is because "She is very intrested in women in an emotional way".²¹ You can conclude now Heimans work is very rich in themes- from mundane incidents and autobiographical childhood memories to works by other artists, films, photographs, diaries, clinical studies and psychoanalytic texts.²²

3.0 Three Works

#1. The Artwork of "I was there Nan" from 2001 (see ill. 2) is one of here works where she puts herself inside the mirror of Nan Goldin. This photo is a very famous self-portrait of Nan Goldin (1953). Goldin is a Jewish American art photographer, who began documenting the post-punk new-wave music scène, along with the city's vibrant, post-Stonewall gay subculture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Goldins personal live was quite turbulent at that time. When she was young her sister Barbara Holly committed suicide at the age of eighteen. This event had a huge impact on live and work. Her snapshot aesthetic images depict drug use, violent, aggressive couples and autobiographical moments. There are always a lot of mirrors in Goldins work; she has affectionately documented women looking in mirrors. One of her series is called: "I'll Be Your Mirror" (from a song on The Velvet Underground's *The Velvet Underground & Nico* album). In this self-portrait her boyfriend had beaten her just before. Here gaze is very sad. Heiman puts herself inside Goldins mirror in the background. This photo in the mirror is a self-portrait of Heiman; she implanted her hands and face and here camera in Goldins picture. The camera of Heiman is shown, because there was no other possibility.²³ She looks surprised with an open mouth, like she was the witness of the scene. The stamp "I was there Nan" makes you think she was there. The inscription, declaring Heiman's presence at the scene, it reminiscent of the spirit of Jan van Eyck's famous painting 'Wedding of Arnolfinis' (see ill. 1), in which the artist is present as a witness. In that painting there is also a mirror with a reflection of the artist. (See ill.3) Heimans act of implantation gives the photo a unique energy, demanding a new interpretation. Heiman explained to me that she puts herself in this artwork because she wants to feel how it is to be inside the artwork. But more important she wants to help Nan Goldin and show

¹⁹ Suppelement page 7 Gallit Allat interview, 2010

²⁰ Suppelement page 12 Gallit Allat interview, 2010

²¹ Suppelement page 13 Gallit Allat interview, 2010

²² *Michal Heiman. Attacks on Linking. Page 196, 2009*

²³ Suppelement page 1 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

her empathy and to be next to her because she was beaten before. Heiman wants to be on the same side like in therapy and become the “third” together maybe.²⁴ With the stamp she is trying to speak to Nan Goldin, you the spectator, the photographer, Nans boyfriend who beaten her and herself. She is also attacking the photo by putting herself inside the artwork (from the inside) but also from the outside by putting a stamp on it. But in a way it also has a link with theatre, a kind of primitive theatre, like Barthes explains in ‘*Camera Lucida*’ a tableau vivant.²⁵

#2. With the photo from the “Attacks on Linking: Scrolls” (see ill. 4) series with the self-portrait of the American Jewish photographer Diane Arbus (1923 – July 26, 1971) she wants to show empathy again, she explained to me. This self-portrait was from Diane private album and Heiman thinks that Diane never wanted to show it to the public. The first time it was shown to the public was in 2003 in the book ‘*Diane Arbus Revelations*’. Her daughter Doon managed Arbus's estate.²⁶ Heiman thinks that it was Doons reasonability that this private picture became public.²⁷ Heiman did not like this publication of this private picture and that’s why she did put a black bar in front of here breasts, to protect her, to cover her up. Heiman penetrates this work of art to show Diane empathy. To be together there at the same side. The stamp is calling in Hebrew Arbus her given name Diane. Why ‘Diane?’ Heiman wants to say: Diane what happened? She is attacking from the inside by penetrating the photo with here own self-portrait. But also from the outside by calling ‘Diane?’ With the stamp she was trying to talk to Diane Arbus, to you the spectator, to herself, but maybe also to Doon Arbus. It is like she wants to bring the death person alive again. Diane Arbus committed suicide when she was very young. Like Barthes is explaining in his novel ‘*Camera Lucida*’: photography is always linked with death.²⁸ Heiman is trying to fight that theory she explained to me, she wants to bring pictures back to alive again.²⁹ The self-portrait of a pregnant Diane Arbus was taken in a long shaped tall mirror. Heiman puts herself next to her but covers her own face with her camera. Maybe she wants to protect herself too, like a mask. Also the camera of Arbus is reflected in the mirror so there are two cameras that are reflected in this mirror. Heiman is ‘on the same side’ to help and protect her. For Heiman Diane Arbus is also here extended family.³⁰ The artwork is printed on a photo backdrop of a studio: a scroll.

#3. With the painting of Johannes Vermeer (1632 1675) ‘A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal’ (1670) there is something else going on. On this painting you can see a richly dressed lady playing a

²⁴ Supplement page 2 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

²⁵ Barthes, page 32

²⁶ Lubow, 2010

²⁷ Supplement page 2 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

²⁸ Barthes page 94

²⁹ Supplement page 2 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

³⁰ Supplement page 7 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

virginal standing in a wealthy Delft home with paintings on the wall, a marble-tiled floor, and a skirting of locally produced Delft blue and white tiles. Heiman made an artwork from this painting and it belonged to the "I Was There" series (see ill. 5). With this painting of Vermeer Heiman is trying to do something else than in the Nan Goldin or Diane Arbus photographs. She still wants to research how it feels to be inside this painting. But this time she don't want to show empathy to this lady, Heiman wants to feel like how it is to be a seventeen-century woman in the Netherlands, it has more to do with theatre. It is like dressing up she told me, and trying to understand the relationship there, to make a research there. It is like taking different costumes on and different masks.³¹ Again she is attacking the artwork from the inside and from the outside. This time she puts herself in the artwork twice. One time on top of the face of the girl, so she is really dressed up because Heiman is wearing a dress now. And the second time in the background in a self-portrait in the mirror. This is the same picture she used before with the Nan Goldin picture, with an open mouth, like she surprised. On this artwork there is also twice the stamp 'I Was There'. This could be the voice of the painter; the voice of someone who was there, the voice of Heiman or the voice of the spectator. "I Was There" is a sort of declaration, confession or comment regarding a particular site that two people speak of. A phrase typically uttered after something-an event- has taken place, this phrase is part of a conversation. The artwork looks like it is a postcard, under there is written the title of the painting and the museum where it is hanging. On top is written: 'The world as theatre, live as comedy I the world of every day'. This is probably Heimans text. That means that this work is not only to do with theatre but also with humor and comedy.

3.0 Conclusion.

Michal Heimans work is about women because she is interested in the woman and female gender in an emotional way. She uses her self-portraits in the mirror a lot to show empathy or to research how it is to be inside a picture or painting. Depicted in the mirror is the only way to penetrate an artwork from the Western canon in art history, something no one else did before Heiman said. As a child she was already fascinated by mirrors, once even a mirror saved her live. All the self-portraits in the mirror were taken with Heimans own camera. Because Heiman herself took the picture in the mirror she could not accomplish being without the camera there in the reflections of the mirror. Heiman herself has an intense desire to unite with here surroundings and look at the world together, like she did in these artworks. A situation you can compare with a therapist and patient, together on the same side looking at the world. But its like theater too, it is like dressing up and a comedy. It is like taking different costumes on and different masks. Heiman

³¹ Supplement page 2 interview Venus Veldhoen 2010

build bridges between herself, the artist and his work by putting herself inside the work. But also a bridge with the spectator. Using these photographs and paintings as backdrops, Heiman incorporates text and her own portrait to create new meanings, and brings past and present together. Trying to make the past closer to the present, with word and image.

See here WEBSITE <http://www.michalheiman.com/>



III.3



1. "Jan van Eyck was here" inscribed next to van Eyck's signature on his painting *Wedding of the Arnolfinis*, 1434

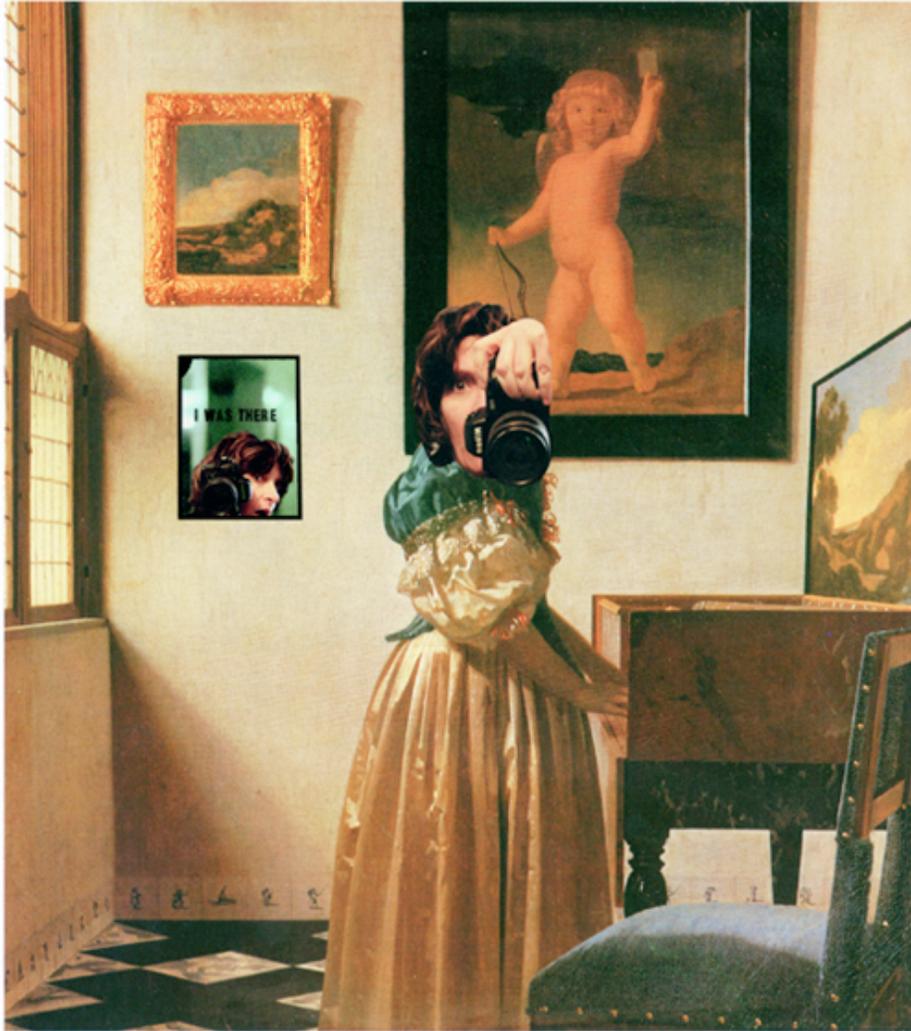


I WAS THERE, NAN

2. Michal Heiman: I was there



4. Michal Heiman: Attacks on linking.



I WAS THERE

Vermeer van Delft (Jan Vermeer, known as) 1633-1675
Lady standing at the virginals, 1670
London, National Gallery

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<http://michalheiman.wordpress.com>

Attachment 1: Interview Venus Veldhoen and Michal Heiman Amsterdam, Tel Aviv: 14 December 2010

Attachment 2: Interview Venus Veldhoen, Sietske Rooraa with Gallit Allat, Eindhoven, November 2010