

Rosen is not Frank

Ariella Azoulay

*Lecture at the New School, New York - Alter Egos as Political & Artistic
Strategy*

Who are "Justine Frank and Roe Rosen"? Who have co-signed the book *Sweet
Sweat* (2001), and what are the relations between them? The text on the back
cover of the book explains this as follows (in a free translation):

"This book, the only one written by the Jewish Belgium woman
artist Justine Frank, presents a scandalous combination of eroticism
and Judaism, surrealism and pornography [...] the present edition
includes two expanded texts by Roe Rosen: Frank's biography and
a research including remarkable and contradictory interpretations of
the feminine identity in this oeuvre, and of the sense of Judaism as it
is represented in this unique context".

Frank, it seems, is a forgotten author who has been recently discovered by a
young, dynamic and talented researcher. You certainly recognize this type of
cultural practice. Every once in awhile, since the late nineteenth century, at least,
there appears in the world of art and literature someone, usually an editor or a
curator, who claims to discover an excluded or forgotten artist or author, and
makes his own fame in his turn by making his discovery public and associating
himself with the forgotten genius.

The discovery of Justine Frank was certainly achieved with *Sweet Sweat*, as is
always the case in such heroic acts of pulling someone out of oblivion, but in

the present case *Sweet Sweat* was not only a side effect of the efforts, but part of the lost object itself, if not the very object of Rosen's investigations, as I will try to show toward the end of my talk.

But let me start first by addressing the complex question of identity and authorship. I would like to do so by taking a close look at Rosen and Frank's portraits printed on the back cover of the book. His bristly look is striking. Although it can be seen as the fashionable male look of the time, one can't miss the exhausted facial expression which makes the bristles mere traces of his fatigue. Here is the young researcher presented as a true scholar who spent nights and days in quest of his lost object in a damp basement of some murky archive. His eyes are wide open; his gaze is up lifted, maybe due to the high angle of the camera. Frank's photo, on the other hand, is an old shabby one, scratched all over.

The vertical and the horizontal lines which cross each other and superimposed on Frank's face, create the impression that we see her through a viewfinder or even cross-hairs. Although these lines can be simple physical marks of a previously folded photo, their symbolic value can't be ignored. The center of the cross-hairs misses the center of Franks' face and seems floating over her. If the cross-hairs would be moved slightly to the right, its center will pinpoint Rosen's face exactly at its center. This eventual migratory movement of the

cross-hairs from Frank to Rosen, link both portraits together but leave the question who is the author unsolved.

One of the first things one learns in drawing classes is to draw a kind of cross-hairs as a preparatory structure for a portrait. The vertical line should cut the face along the nose; the horizontal line should split them on the height of the eyes. Doing it well should help to capture the face. Having this pattern in mind, one immediately notices that Frank's eyes are fallen below the eyes' line, while Rosen's are up to it. Rosen's face is upward, while Frank's face is bent down. Rosen looks straight ahead, slightly up, while Frank can hardly raise her head up. The imbalance between both faces is striking and resonates clearly a pair of portraits which was very common in medieval Christian iconography – I mean the two damsels Ecclesia and Synagoga. In this medieval portraiture, Ecclesia's gaze, representing Christianity, is raised up, while Synagoga's gaze, representing Judaism, is blindfolded and bent down. In this context, the white horizontal strip placed slightly above Frank's eyes looks like the white bandage which was finally pulled from her, while her eyes are still traumatized by the blindfolding or maybe by the sudden exposure to light.

Let's follow our first clue. On the cover of *Sweet Sweat*, Justine Frank, presumably the first Jewish author of a pornographic novel, appears as Synagoga, while the redeeming artist who interprets her deeds and words appears as Ecclesia. In medieval iconography, the common image of both

damsels presents the triumph of the church over the synagogue. In *Sweet Sweat* – written in 1931 - Justin Frank reactivates this seminal scene. Somewhere toward the middle of the novel, a duel is fought between two young lawyers – Philip and Gaston – who are in love with Rachel, the novel's heroine. The two fight in order to determine who is going to become the desired woman's slave. The Hebrew translator of the novel, who has also completed its missing parts and added a commentary, writes that the duel is "an artistic realization of the polemic between the church and the synagogue" (172). "The new sex identity" of the two young lawyers, the novel continues in Franks own words, "was publicly declared: **from now on they are damsels**. The duel should be merciless and should be played unto death" (p. 174). The translator describes the outcome of the duel: "following a harsh and violent struggle, the blind synagogue, namely the Jewish religion, overcomes her rival" (Ibid). Does this mean that a reversal of power relations between the two has taken place? Not really, or at least not for long. Very soon we learn that Philip's victory is actually a defeat and the poor champion is going to be punished by a series of tortures: his eyes will be blindfolded forever, his tongue deformed and his speech spoiled.

In the absence of a Jewish pornographic literature, the appearance of Justine Frank on the stage of history is not something that goes without saying. Neither a woman nor a man, but a migrating gender figure is the author of the first pornographic Jewish novel. Justine Frank, the Jewess whose gaze is lowered,

oscillates between full submissiveness to the male porno-philosophical tradition and a full liberty of someone, who during centuries was freed from the burden of the visual and could follow its imagination in the verbal realm.

Let's take another look at the icons of the two damsels printed on the cover in order to reconstruct the indeterminacy between the roles they are playing.

Synagogua, who represents the verbal culture of the law, and is usually represented by "the tables of the Covenant", is now incarnated by Rosen, a writer who devotes the last five years to the restoration of a body of work of a persecuted Jewish figure; Ecclesia, who represents the visual culture and is usually represented by the architectonic form of a church, is incarnated by Justine Frank, a visual artist who's major body of work consists of paintings and drawings based on Christian iconography and projected Jewish imagery.

But in the case of Rosen and Frank the distinction between the verbal and the visual is thoroughly unstable. Suffice to take in consideration that Rosen is primarily a visual artist whose work as a researcher started, or so he tells us, by a mere coincidence after finding a few traces of Frank's work, and that the verbal is Frank's domain, even when she acts as an artist, as can be seen in her calligraphic work, where every letter of the alphabet conveys a confession regarding one of "her" sins. Rosen, a visual master and a great connoisseur of the Christian iconography, which is plainly recognized in his visual work, is the perfect Jewish candidate to play Ecclesia's role, no less than that of Synagoga.

He wrestles with those who for years dominated the Israeli art field, trying to keep those who take part in it as both Jewish and secular, protecting the frontier of their field from an invasion of Christian matters. But simultaneously he plays the persecuted Jew who was banished off the local, secular art field that for years rejected everything that smelled too Jewish. By playing this double role, he imposes on the local agenda to deal with previously prohibited topics such as the Judeo-Christian link, and the special role played in it by body matters and gender troubles. For the pursuit of his beliefs he even dares to invent the figure and story of Justine Frank and benefits from her reputation as an old "master".

Rosen, who apparently made way to Frank's speech and supported it with what seems as a profound academic discourse, actually renewed the duel between Ecclesia and Synagoga. Speaking on her behalf, and trying to control her thoughts and deeds, he might have been surprised by Frank's independent existence after her awakening. Her text – of which many fragments are missing – was created as such by Rosen for the sake of its authenticity, but soon has gained a life of its own. It can be continued, questioned, interpreted, and its gaps can be filled by the words of others, his/her readers, not only by Rosen's words. To put it differently, from the moment Justine Frank has been created, no one, even not Rosen, is able to control her existence. His noble title - Rosen in Hebrew is literally a Count, susceptible to guarantee his position in a hierarchical social order, fails to do so and Rosen found himself alternately the

patron and the humble servant of Justine, the good virtue from Sade's novel.

From the moment Justine Frank was thrown into the world with some particular traits, she dominates Rosen's doings no less than he dominates hers.

A persistent rumor has it that the woman in the photo printed on the cover, is no other than Rosen's legal wife. I know her personally, and I give my word that this rumor is true. Needless to say, however, that Rosen's wife is not Justine Frank. There is another rumor, which I cannot deny or approve, according to which Justine Frank is Rosen himself. Neither the true rumor nor the dubious one helps us to unravel the imbroglio of identities that we are facing here.

Recognizing in Frank nothing but an image which an artist would adopt as his own, just one more gesture in the tradition of artists who produce their self-portrait "as someone – or something else", is a complete misunderstanding.

Rosen is not seeking to make a portrait of himself as Frank and anyhow, "his" Frank is made out of a portrait of someone else, his wife. Rosen is actualizing a Deleuzien notion of *becoming* which should be understood in opposition to the notion *being* around which the discourse of identity usually takes place. Rosen will never be Frank. Neither Rosen, nor Frank, for that matter, are stable identities that can be substituted for each other. Becoming is an unfinished transformation that bypasses the requirements of fix identities and destabilizes important notions on which our political culture is based: property, belonging, origin, birth, authenticity, reliability etc. The becoming-Justine-Frank of Rosen

challenges these notions that lie at the foundations of the artistic as well as the political field. Rosen is not Justine Frank, Rosen is not frank,

Rosen can't be frank. He can be frank neither when he declares himself the origin of this work, nor when he denies the very existence of such an origin. It is not his reliability which is suspected, it is the notion of reliability itself which Frank's affair exposed to be dubious. From the beginning, the fictional feature of Frank's oeuvre has not been entirely concealed. Behind this alleged secret of her (in)existence, was another secret, the secret of those who were part of the secret. Prominent figures in the art world, which used reliability as a code for discerning good artists from others, authorized Rosen to do what anyone else was forbidden to do: to produce a work for which he was not the origin *and* to attribute it to someone else who endowed him with her glory. The effect of Rosen-Frank's work was that of a ghost – it was deeply anchored in the cultural history of Europe and Israel, but also alien to both, thus helping to bring to surface some of its repressed elements. This work is partially recognizable as Rosen's but is also somehow different from what he could produce independently. It haunts the local art scene and serves as a detector of its primal sin. One can neither confirm nor deny its existence.

If Rosen would not have tracked her down, a figure like her should have been invented in order to undermine the fantasy of the origin of Israeli art and its alleged independence from the sin of origin of the Israeli State. In 1948, at the

moment of the creation of the State of Israel, a group of artists left the national association of artists and founded an alternative association. They criticized the dominant, Zionist understanding of art as part of the national project, and rejected what they perceived as realism and symbolism in favor of abstract art, which they associated with the autonomy of art and with a "normal" art scene. This "normalcy" of producing non-national art, one should remember, was gained through the distinct national identity of its participants. Their conception of what art is, and what it should be and not be dominated the Israeli art scene till the nineties. Justine Frank represents and embodies everything which the modern, secular founders of Israeli art abhorred: sexuality, religiosity, excess, randomness, verbosity, and fortuitousness. In the Zionist narrative of normalization there have always been many "first" Israeli-Jews: The first Jewish thief, warrior, scientist, whore, etc. At long last, in the nineties, thanks to Justin Frank, this list has been completed with the appearance of the first Jewish heroine of a pornographic novel and the first Jewish woman artist who uses explicit pornography in her work. The local art scene has gained what has been so far missing from it: an eccentric female figure writing and painting Jewish pornographic imagery. Paradoxically, Frank's alterity enables one to re-experience the fantasy of normalcy that haunted the birth of modern Israeli art.

To put it differently, the so called abnormality of Frank functions as a way to regain normalcy. But these two moments of normalcy have a common ground –

its artist, even the most eccentric, is always a Jew – and thus playing his Jewishness to produce normalcy he ends up reinforcing the national character of Israeli art.

One last point that actually opens a whole new domain, which I will not be able to explore here for lack of time: Including Frank in Israeli art, means accepting her particular smell for which she was rejected from the Israeli art world. It is a known fact, her biographer tells us, that her body emitted distinctly bad smell: "... The slanderers also maintained that she neglected her personal hygiene and had a terrible stench" (p. 70). *Sweet Sweat* novel, written in 1931, tells the story of the heroine Rachel who was rescued thanks to her extraordinary odors. With it we stand at the threshold of a new era in which the noses of odors experts, olfactory connoisseurs, might put an end to a smell-detesting culture that expelled Frank and stigmatized the Jewish and feminine body. Eva Braun, Rosen's previous heroine, deconstructs such a utopian vision of "a new era" that started in 1933. A few years after the publication of Frank's novel, Braun's story tells us, her lover – Adolf Hitler, who could not have been seduced by any of Braun's attractive odors, persecuted the Jews for their stinking bodies. His abhorrence of any smell, namely "the smell of the other", was well known. Juxtaposing the stories of Frank and Braun, one can't avoid thinking how history would have unfolded differently if only Hitler would have come by the sweet sweat of Justine Frank...