

Between Joke and Terror: Roe Rosen's Unsettling Mimesis

Ekaterina Degot

Mimesis as Mise-en-Abyme

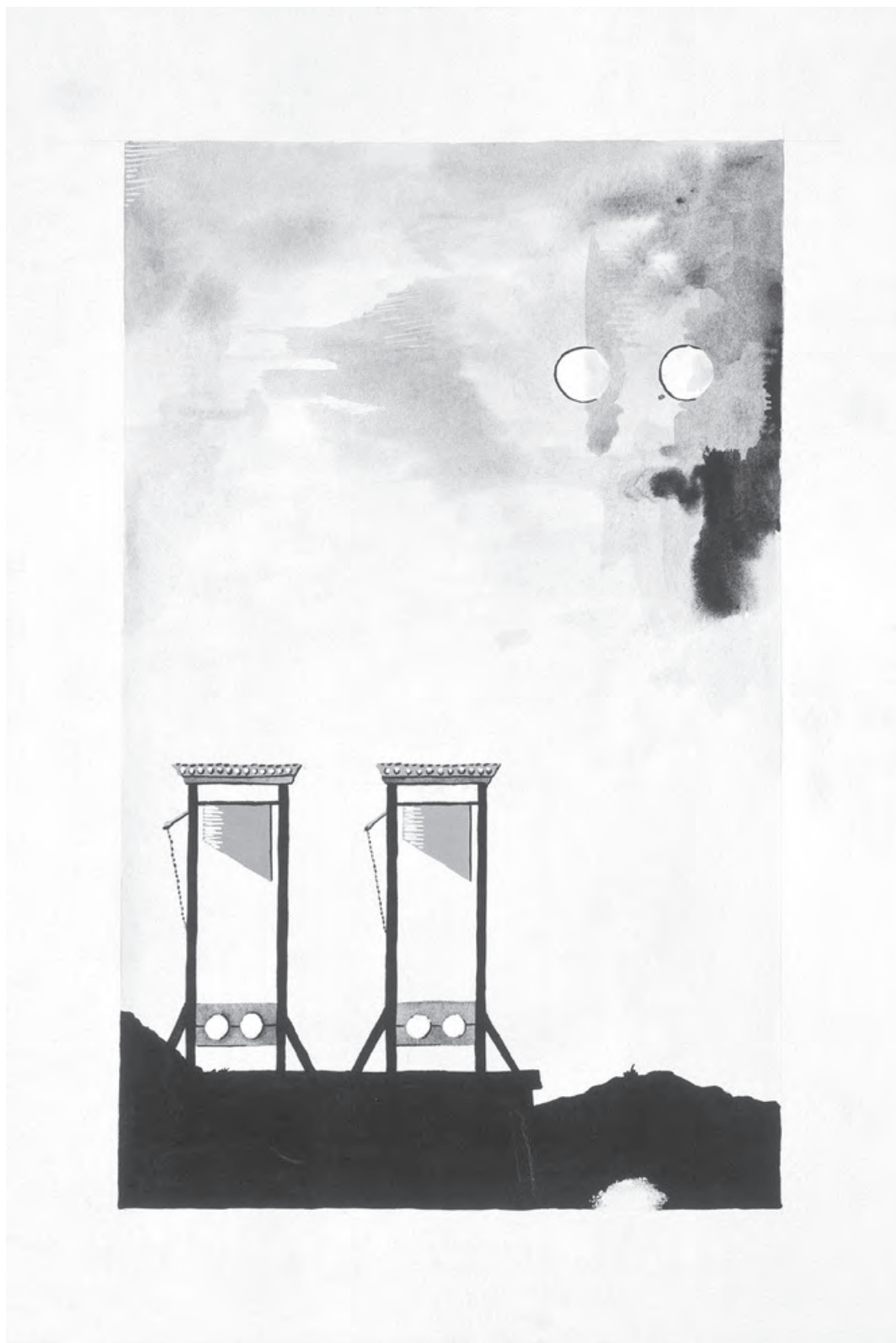
This essay centers on Roe Rosen's *Double Guillotine Double* (1936) by Justine Frank (2003)—part of the oeuvre of a “rediscovered” fellow traveler of the Surrealists. The painting, which features an oneiric *objet machine*, is discussed by Rosen in his theoretical afterword to “Justine Frank’s” pornographic novel *Sweet Sweat*, where he forges a connection between Frank and Jacob Dobruschka, aka Junius Frey—an alchemist, a freemason, a Jew converted into a catholic mystic, and nephew of Jacob Frank, During the French Revolution, Frey—who became a Jacobin towards the end of his life—was beheaded alongside his brother on the same day as Danton.¹

With its double opening, which implies the presence of a two-headed body, the guillotine deconstructs and defies the singular subject at the core of the Western philosophical tradition, as well as the artistic practices identified with it. Indeed, Rosen's authorship itself is often double-layered: he hides behind fictitious artists of his own invention, ranging from the stunning Justine Frank, who merged eroticism with Jewish imagery, to Efim Poplavsky, aka Maxim Komar-Myshkin—a Russian emigré to Israel whose work combines a similarly erotic thrust with political engagement and a dash of the macabre. A recurring motif in many of Rosen's works is performative replication and its magical power, or the failure thereof. In *The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, the author's confessions are delivered by three proxies, illegal foreign workers who read the text in Hebrew—a language they do not understand. In *Out* (2010, pp. 216–227), a BDSM scene turns into an exorcism as the submissive protagonist finds herself possessed by the spirit of Israeli right-wing politician Avigdor Liebermann and expectorates his political statements in a bizarre show of ventriloquism.

Since the inception of modernism, if not earlier, the normative model of individual authorship has conceived of the artwork as a unique extension of the artist's personality, an autonomous, sovereign and non-imitative creation culminating in the supremacy of abstraction. Although abstract art in itself is obviously no longer *le dernier cri*, these expectations still prevail and can be discerned even in the definition of art as “knowledge production,” as if this knowledge was always a form of free, abstract, and intransitive reasoning emanating from the self. For Roe Rosen, art is never free, pure, or independent in this sense; it is always overburdened by extra baggage that is more palpably material than an arbitrarily ascribed “referent.” In this artist's universe, there is always something that, or someone who, is represented, imitated, mimed, or animated (all normative procedures associated with “visual art” before its shift towards immateriality). There is always a body buried somewhere.

This body can be buried deep, so deep that it can no longer be reached by either the artist or the viewer. We might not know what is mimed, buried, or repressed, but just feel that something is—an uncanny situation when an artist, as famously put by Roger Caillois in *Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia*, “is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*.”²

Rosen's art as a mimetic practice is not a form of knowledge production, but rather an act of understanding, always an understanding of *something*, which is always chained to the heavy cannon ball of an object. And this form of artistic production is sensuous and magical, transforming both the one who represents and the one being represented. As stated by Michael Taussig, whose writings on mimesis and alterity are extremely relevant here, “to give an example, to instantiate, to be concrete are all examples of the magic of mimesis wherein the replication, the copy acquires



Justine Frank, Double Double Guillotine, 1936, gouache on paper, 50x35
ז'וסטין פרנק, גיליוטינה כפולה כפולה, 1936, גואש על נייר, 35x50

the power of the represented.”³ Roe Rosen’s art of examples, which is falsely didactic and allegedly child-friendly, is in reality (reality? really?) deeply unsettling in its revelation of perverse mechanisms of thinking and “figuring out.”

Rosen’s oeuvre, as well as the oeuvre of his surrogate artists, is hyper-mimetic and obsessively figurative, yet it is by no means realist. Sympathetic magic is at the core of the entire practice undertaken by Komar-Myshkin, whose life’s work is an album of detailed drawings (in what is perhaps the most magical style of all—an old picture-book style with moving parts) created as a supernatural weapon against Vladimir Putin. By drawing him as tortured and dead, Komar-Myshkin hopes to see his enemy exterminated. This is a practice of mimesis as *mise en abyme*: Rosen mimes Komar-Myshkin, who faithfully represents everyday objects which, in turn, represent human faces and acquire a voodoo-like power through representational devices. This practice is repeated once again when Rosen describes *tableaux vivants* reenacting famous museum paintings (as he did in *Lucy*, an early artist’s book created in 1991–1992, as well as later in *Sweet Sweat*, pp. 124–129), or when his artist alter egos paint human faces by using objects rather than lines and dabs of paint (as do Justine Frank and Naomi Elvissa, a character from Rosen’s 2000 book *A Different Face*). In *Lucy*, Rosen lists a number of hilarious subjects studied by the protagonist at academic seminars; at least one of them—*The Dialectics of the Response to the Response to the Response to Late Modernist Abstraction*—could well be described as one of Rosen’s own themes.

A Joke Deprived of Paradox

A double guillotine is a hybrid, an exquisite corpse like the one once proposed by Picasso to Breton when he suggested that the emblematic force of the hammer-and-sickle might be stronger “if their handles were one, and could be held with one hand.”⁴ Such an object presupposes the existence of a subject whose body is able to manage this technological

and dialectical contradiction, as is similarly the case with the double guillotine. In this instance, however, the hybrid is a tautological one—absurd in its stubbornness but not paradoxical, since it does not contain the kind of liberating contradiction that Benjamin called a “dialectical justice” (*Gerechtigkeit*), or the dialectical, cathartic annihilation of opposites.⁵ In Roe Rosen’s/Justine Frank’s watercolors (“The Stained Portfolio” and others), we often encounter symmetrical Rorschach’s inkblots centered on a void—a menorah, a vulva, a butterfly, or a Star of David—which is presented as a pause between two charged, diametrically opposed elements. This space in-between offers a suspension of contradictions as a suspension of time, and perhaps even an interruption of history. Yet a double guillotine is not symmetrical; the diagonal blade remains one, so that one head will roll seconds after another. Asymmetry, in this case, invokes the painfulness of historical time.

This hybrid, whose two parts merge in an organic way (albeit one disturbingly severed by the single blade), is enigmatically doubled once again through the process of mechanical repetition and by the two identical moons shining over the heads. If a double guillotine is a joke, then this joke is told again a second time—a retelling that is always an awkward moment. And if, moreover, repetition is at the core of the joke, its origins can be traced to Henri Bergson’s famous observation about the comical effect of automatism, or factory production,⁶ while raising the following question: is repetition of a repetition funnier or less funny?

The self-sabotage involved in repetition, with its uncertain results, is something that haunts Rosen’s oeuvre. In *Hilarious* (2010, pp. 204–215), a filmed stand-up-comedy monologue, the female performer makes gags on extremely disturbing and tragic topics, leading one to wonder whether, as a result, the tragic effect is increased or diminished. In his comments on this work (*Towards the Work “Hilarious,” Former Cases of Dysfunctional Humor*), Rosen calls it “a bodily



and verbal performance that goes against itself”, one “meant to employ familiar comic devices and sabotage them simultaneously.”⁷ Among these devices are failed mimetic procedures, including non-ironical repetitions.

The main dysfunctional device here is the dialectical negation of negation, whose unstoppable machinery is unable to operate as neatly as a guillotine, for “there is always a residue.”⁸ As Stalin famously remarked in justifying the Great Terror, “You can’t chop wood without making the chips fly.” Or, as the Americans kept repeating in Iraq, “More rubble, less trouble.” You break your eggs to make an omelet, but then you have to “break” the omelet as well: the negation of negation never stops.

As Rosen puts it in his insightful and courageous text *The Law Is Laughing. Fragments Following the War in Gaza*, “when the law is its own negation, its comicality is like spasmodic coughing.”⁹ One could argue that this same “spasmodic coughing” of mimetic seizures does result in catharsis in the work *Out*, but is this indeed true? In the film’s finale, the protagonist who spits

out her right-wing demon feels relieved, but has this dangerous form of possession been transmitted instead to her companions, who turn to whine over a gooey Esenin song (about his old mother, his village roots and everything Esenin is so good at)?

Mimesis, Violence and Colonial-Style Shame

The guillotine that is so awkwardly negated (or reinforced?) in Rosen’s painting stands, predictably, for violence. It is the very sleekness of its geometrical blade, together with its pedigree as an invention of the French Revolution (located at the dawn of modern history and modern art) that makes it a perfect metaphor for the ruthlessness of modernist art and its growing thrust towards fully abstract forms. In this image by Rosen\Frank, the moment of revolutionary terror heralds the future artistic terror of the avant-garde and its iconoclastic destruction of traditional figuration, as it rises slowly over the horizon of a still representational, mimetic world towards its eventual triumph. In *The Aesthetics of Terror*, Rosen describes



the representation of contemporary state terror, demonstrating how the obfuscation of narrative and the erasure of heroic figures reinforces violence and justifies how “abstraction and purity [...] are meant to connote reason, order, control and cleanliness.”¹⁰ State terror, in this context, is obviously closely related to the colonial violence of modernism as an imposed structure of the new.

For centuries, mimesis constituted the predominant Western mode of visual production, while being haunted by its non-Western, “primitive” double, in which mimesis was associated with sympathetic magic. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after modernists such as Gauguin and Picasso started exploiting the “primitive,” art took further steps towards cubism and abstraction. Western

mimesis began to be perceived as outdated, imitative and reactionary, and was slighted for being a craft, a didactic form of entertainment for children and the low classes, rather than a privileged form of art for an educated audience. Much like realism and figuration, the triumphal neo-modernist mimesis was frowned upon as art that imitates not so much reality itself (who cared about reality?), but rather the Western cannon. The art of the Second and Third Worlds, meanwhile was (and still is) met with colonial disdain for its belatedness, and its style was shamed for not being modern enough.

The early Russian avant-garde may be associated with a strong decolonizing trend (which has yet to be recognized as such) that resisted the colonial exclusion of mimesis and preached a holistic approach referred to as “everythingism” (всѣчество, vsiochestvo). In the early twentieth century, the “everythingists” (Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova were the most famous ones) took a position against the typical Western, modernist fetishization of the new and the unique, and against the exclusion of those things considered non-Western, outdated, or conservative:

We declare that there never has been such a thing as a copy and recommend painting from pictures painted before the present day. We maintain that art cannot be examined from the point of view of time.

We acknowledge all styles are suitable for the expression of our art, styles existing both yesterday and today [...]

We are against the West, which is vulgarizing our forms and Eastern forms, and which is neutralizing everything.¹¹

As if in response to this manifesto, Ilya Kabakov’s fictitious artist Charles Rosenthal (*Life and Creativity of Charles Rosenthal*), a former student of Malevich



who emigrated to Paris, merges realist and abstract fragments into a single whole. (Like Rosen and his doubles, Kabakov voluntarily loses himself in a post-*abstraction*, mimetic *mise en abyme*).

Rosen, who is surrounded in Israel by many representatives of this extremely idiosyncratic artistic tradition (ranging from the Russian avant-garde to the “second avant-garde” of conceptual artists in Moscow, New York, and Tel Aviv in the 1960s–1980s), often explicitly refers to it. The “Buried Alive” manifesto written by Komar-Myshkin and his fellow artists amounts to a clearly declared affiliation with the artistic and intellectual context of Russian futurism, and helps to define the position of an Israeli artist in the colonial debate about mimesis. This position is, as it is well known, deeply entangled in contradictions, since there is still no consensus as to whether the Zionist venture should be seen as part of the white colonial settlement

project, and as to how to deal with the self-colonizing impulse of every Europeanized province within a non-European sphere. Russia’s colonial and self-colonizing history, which was profoundly affected by mimesis with its double overtones of freedom and violence, is similarly (albeit not in the same way) a painful, suppressed abscess that only artists can hope to open.

Notes

- 1 Roe Rosen, “Glaat-Kosher Surrealist Smut. On Justine Frank’s *Sweet Sweat*,” in Justine Frank, Roe Rosen, *Sweet Sweat* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), 183f.
- 2 Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia,” in *October: The First Decade*, eds. Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michaelson, et al., trans. John Shepley (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 58.
- 3 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993)16.
- 4 André Breton, “Interview d’Indice” (Revue socialiste de culture, Tenerife), in André Breton, *Position politique du surréalisme* (Paris: Société nouvelle des éditions Pauvert, 1971), 53–54
- 5 Walter Benjamin (1929), “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of European Intelligentsia,” in *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 143–161.
- 6 Henri Bergson (1911), *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Claudeskey Bretton and Fred Rothwell (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999).
- 7 Roe Rosen (2004), “The Aesthetics of Terror,” in *Maarvon Cinema Magazine*, No. 1, 58–60.
- 8 Benjamin, “Surrealism,” see f.n. 5 above.
- 9 Roe Rosen, “The Law Is Laughing. Fragments Following the War in Gaza,” <http://www.branding-democracy.org/?q=node/199>
- 10 Roe Rosen, “The Aesthetics of Terror,” see f.n. 7 above.
- 11 “Rayonists and Futurists,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism. 1902–1934*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988) 89–90. Bowlt translates *vsio niveliruet* as “is bringing down the level of everything,” but I prefer “is neutralizing everything.”