

ROEE ROSEN

Live and Die as Eva Braun, 1995

PLATE 3

Male Fantasies of Hitler: Confusing Gender and Identity

A “twilight zone of right and wrong [where] . . . questions are truly experienced” describes how the works of Piotr Uklański, Rudolf Herz, and Elke Krystufek operate. These are precisely the words Israeli artist Roee Rosen uses to describe his intentions for his installation and artist’s book *Live and Die as Eva Braun*.¹ In ten chapters, Rosen pairs text with sixty black-and-white drawings on paper. The drawings have deckled edges mimicking mid-century vernacular photographs. Written as a virtual-reality scenario, Rosen’s text asks the viewer (male or female) to become—that is, to perform, at least for the duration of his or her visit—the role of Hitler’s mistress Eva Braun. We are asked to assume Braun’s identity and to experience her narrative empathically at a crucial, if not culminating, moment in her life. We are to become Eva when she meets her aging lover for the last time, the moment he will, after a final sex act, kill her. The suicide pact between Hitler and his mistress is already a metanarrative that mixes fact and myth to fabricate history. In Rosen’s text, Eva recalls earlier moments in their relationship. She shares intimacies that are at once naïve, titillating, and vulgar. At every turn, the narrative is accompanied by drawings that mirror its paradoxical juncture between naïveté and pornography.

Rosen requires the viewer to enter a virtual-reality world. Encountering Braun’s seduction, suicide, and improbable assumption into a netherworld, the narrative is connected to disjointed images. With their scalloped edges, the drawings look as if they are from an old scrapbook. In this way they resemble Christian Boltanski’s appropriation of a Nazi officer’s photo album (see page 8). But Rosen’s handmade drawings refuse to succumb to appropriation and, as such, contradict the high-tech notions of virtual reality that he wishes the viewer to enter. They fabricate a perverse fairy tale using imagery scavenged from various, often incongruous sources. These include German children’s books, German

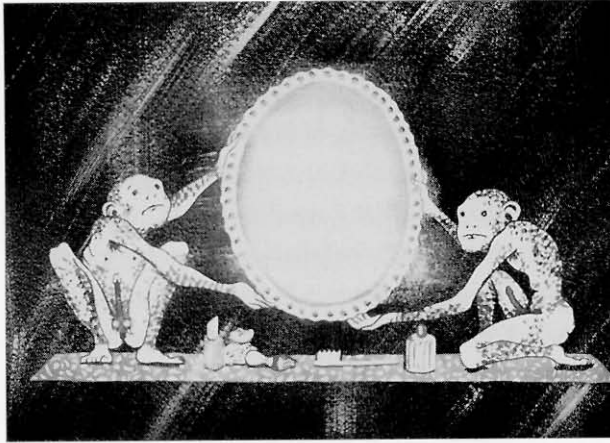


Fig. 1. Roe Rosen, *Live and Die as Eva Braun #1*, 1995. Acrylic on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Romantic painting, and images drawn from popular culture. One pop-culture source is the well-known German farcical comic book *Adolf*. One of the first images we encounter (fig. 1) is one in which we seem to be poised at a console table or vanity looking into an empty mirror held up (or flanked) by two monkeys. We do not know if the monkeys are real or simply decorative elements of the mirror's frames. Through the mirror's emptiness and its mimetic reflection, we begin to imagine ourselves in the process of becoming Eva Braun, and we subsequently imagine the horrendous possibility of being seduced by Hitler. Although Hitler's image never appears in Rosen's project, symbols associated with him float through the drawings and confound a coherent reading. Another depiction resembles a photograph of the artist as toddler, reconfigured so that the child now sports Hitler's trademark mustache and parts his hair on the right side, as Hitler did. Rosen uses a dizzying number of symbolic and mimetic tropes, and the critic Roger Rothman has observed the disjunction of text and image.

Like Rudolf Herz in *Zugzwang*, but through radically different methods, Rosen's *Live and Die as Eva Braun* uses multiplication, fragmentation, doubling, and self-imposed confusion. Rothman demonstrates how the work's "playfulness is undercut with signs of violence, trauma, perversion, and destruction."² As with Krystufek's works, which force us to enter the perpetrator's space, we now become both the subject and the object of defilement. As viewers, we reincarnate the fascist impulse toward self-destruction that was theorized in the early 1930s by Georges Bataille.³

As we enter Rosen's world, we lose control of our judgment and sense of appropriateness. We enter a seductive, if frightening, space in which we cavort with, even approve of, evil, knowing full well its implicit terror. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, A Film from Germany* created a similar sense of intimacy with the twentieth century's symbol of evil incarnate

(fig. 2). As Thomas Elsaesser has shown, watching the film we, as spectators, become exasperated and feel abused. Rosen forces us to the next level of participation, mingling innocence and sex. Rosen also shares Syberberg's deployment of screens and mirrors and engages us in what Elsaesser calls "the Medusa-face of fascination."⁴ Yet Rosen is more akin to Todd Solondz, through whose films, such as *Welcome to the Doll House* (1995) and *Happiness* (1998), we begin to engage, at least in our imaginations, in "inappropriate" behavior. For example, we catch ourselves titillated, laughing at immoral situations.

Rosen's work exemplifies Sidra Ezrahi's perspective on the creation of images after Auschwitz. In opposition to those she calls "mythifiers," Ezrahi notes that for "relativizers," like Rosen and the other artists in this volume, "it is precisely in its [the Holocaust's] ineffability that it is infinitely and diversely representable." More important for Rosen is that "the urgency of representation, then, unfolds in continual tension between desire and its limits."⁵ And it is precisely because of this impulse that Rosen's project was fiercely attacked when it was exhibited at the Israel Museum in 1997, even though Rosen might have possessed greater "legitimacy" than many because he is the son of a Holocaust survivor.

The project's content and consequent transgressions became international news covered by CNN, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*. Israel's Minister of Education asked that the exhibition be closed, and the Israeli news media focused on the controversy, claiming that the project indulged in sensationalism for its own sake and "turn[ed] the Holocaust into pornography." Yet some who saw Rosen's work tried to come face to face with the experience of psychologically entering the proverbial mind and body of Eva Braun. One critic showed how the antagonist Eva helps us come to recognize our deepest fears and desires and "get to know the worst of evil."⁶ Others drew political and social par-



Fig. 2. From the film *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, 1977, directed by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Courtesy of Syberberg Filmproduktion, Munich.

allels to the racism that pervades Israeli society and to the situation of the Palestinians. Through our experience as Eva, we begin to ask ourselves a litany of questions: How can we, as imperfect societies and individuals, so easily cast blame on others? How can we presume to understand right and wrong, good and evil, without having succumbed to the ultimate temptation? Certainly this is not an easily defensible position with regard to the Holocaust. But is it possible to mistakenly see what Rosen has created as a Holocaust memorial or monument? According to the Israeli critic Ariella Azoulay, the exhibition throws the spectator into a maze of intricate systems, in which the viewer "becomes the subject of control, of representation, of evil, of sexuality, of passion, of rejection, of will, of resistance, and of loss." She, also, argues the faultiness of too simplistically connecting Rosen's project to the Holocaust. The subject of its narrative and the nature of its form, in fact, discourage any

"sovereign interpretation" or control of the limits in representing such a chilling subject.⁷ **NLK**

NOTES

1. Roe Rosen, communication with author, February 27, 1999.
2. Roger Rothman, "Speaking Through Irony: On the Recent Work of Roe Rosen," *Studio Art*, no. 88 (December 1997).
3. John Berkman, "Introduction to Bataille," *New German Critique* 16 (Winter 1979): 59.
4. Thomas Elsaesser, "Myth as the Phantasmagoria of History: H. J. Syberberg, Cinema and Representation," *New German Critique* 24/25 (Fall 1981–Winter 1982): 111–13, 144.
5. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Representing Auschwitz," *History and Memory* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 144–45.
6. "Enjoying, Annoying, and Suffering with Eva," trans. Roe Rosen, *Kol Ha'ir Weekly* (Nov. 14, 1997).
7. Ariella Azoulay, "The Spectator's Place [in the Museum]," paper presented at "Representing the Holocaust: Practices, Products, Projections" conference, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Penn., May 21–23, 2000.