

Preface

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The coronavirus, which took our lives by storm in early 2020, is an event without an image. Major historic events of the last decades, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the 9/11 attacks, had unmistakable images. The television networks were at their peak, news was broadcast around the clock, and pictures of the events were disseminated incessantly. The image of the event was inherent to it rather than merely accompanying, marking or representing it; the event was designed to take place in front of the cameras with the goal of generating its images. There were also vaguer images, disconnected from their meaning or reference, such as the dots flashing on the green screen produced by the US Army in the first Gulf War, and there were images whose arrival was delayed and were discovered belatedly, such as the flashes of the camera that recorded the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. But in all of these cases the image engraved the event in history, dominated its real existence, and fixed it in memory. At first it seemed like this would be the case with the coronavirus as well. In the first months it still produced some hair-raising images: people dropping dead on the streets of China, chaos and havoc in the hospitals of northern Italy, giant pits being dug for bodies in New York City. But as the year progressed the images blunted and were unequal to what had changed from a potentially apocalyptic extreme event to an ongoing way of life. The invisible virus, which takes residence in human bodies without their knowledge, which is sometimes revealed by symptoms and at other times stays completely hidden, remained with no representative image, no engraved picture, no visual sign.

Images were replaced by data. Tables and graphs indicating the number of dead, the number of people on respirators, the number of confirmed cases and the number of tests; the percentage of positive test results and the rate of infection; acceleration or deceleration, exponential growth and stabilization trends; red cities and orange areas

and businesses with the purple seal – all based on quantitative indexes. The image was replaced by statistics, an absolute abstraction that neither presents nor represents reality but rather claims its own status as reality, and is therefore the exclusive basis upon which government decisions on coping with the coronavirus are made (in “well-run countries,” of course). Statistics are faceless, imageless, are not iconic and leave no mark; they send out data that change every minute and whose decisiveness is in inverse proportion to their variance. As opposed to the enhanced and sharp image that belongs to the centralized mass media and the live and later replayed television broadcast, the statistical datum is compatible with online news sites and only grows more powerful in a time of decentralized digital images. Contrary to the resolute, emotive, sometimes ecstatic image, statistics are a constantly changing series of indexes, and are indifferent, distant, depressive. But since the statistical datum does not simulate reality, any connection between it and any reality outside of it unravels. Thus, while we are being inundated with data, our sense of reality is only growing weaker. What exactly happened here during the spring months, and then again at the end of the summer, and even now? Is a catastrophic pandemic raging in the streets, with each and every one of us unknowingly posing a threat to anyone with whom we come into contact? Or is it an epidemic that can be confronted by the power of social solidarity in a healthy society? Or rather a sickness that has been blown out of proportion and is covering up more serious economic and political maladies that are flourishing under its cover? Then and now, we are in the dark.

Alongside the imageless statistical data, images reflecting absence emerged during this time: images devoid of action, occurrence or event but rather of standstill, disruption and suspension. Empty roads, streets without a living soul, closed stores, locked public institutions, silent ports of traffic; abandoned city squares, forsaken prayer houses, desolate tourist destinations. These were not images of what was happening and occurring but of what was eliminated, prevented or forbidden. Sometimes it felt as if the activity that did take place – the incessant construction frenzy in the cities, the commerce or shopping activities – was deliberately downplayed to magnify the drama of depletion. Even the prevailing image of the era, a masked human face, externalizes the concealment and depletion of an image: uniformity, the omission of features, and suspension of individuation; a covered face met by a blocked gaze. Thus, against the stream of data and indexes and the nonstop tumult of numbers, stood a silent and glorious expression of cessation. Things that just a moment ago were taken for granted and seemed constant were cut off at once; and the spectacle industry in a society that manufactures images more than anything

else – enhanced, changing, frantic images – suddenly stopped producing images on the one hand, and on the other hand presented an image of stoppage.

The continuum between work, action, habituation, and strikes, idleness, inaction is the subject of this issue of *Theory and Criticism*. Its articles are about posing art as a productive activity, acts of strike and boycott in contemporary art, idleness that is not part of the work order, and the over-productive discourse of political hope and the possibility of its interruption. Unlike the previous issue, which was a theme issue devoted to the New Radical Right, this issue was conceived as an open issue, without a predetermined subject connecting all of its texts. But the cunning of history, and actually the turmoil of the present, led the articles and essays of this issue to be connected to each other by a common thread after all. Stopping, striking and interruption have a significant critical meaning. The disruption of the habitual daily occurrence leads to its defamiliarization and examination from a distance; the destruction of modes of life that were until just a moment ago perceived as natural or necessary raises questions about their nature; and the change in the social order reveals the oppressive arrangements that are at its basis. Granted, it is the central government that shut down the economy, restricted and controlled movement, and thereby reduced human activity and impoverished social life in the last year. But striking is a socialist strategy of rising up against exploitation or oppression, and at critical moments it aims for overall social transformation. And the disruption and stoppage lead to reflection, retreat, change of direction or transformation. All of these are at the center of this issue, and although the research and writing of many of the texts preceded the coronavirus, they demonstrate the beat of time and carry a sharp awareness of the present.

A central place in this issue is given to the thought of Giorgio Agamben, one of the most important continental intellectuals living today. Strike, inaction and deposition, and the disengagement of potentiality from the course of realization are among his central concepts, and several articles in the issue move through them, are written out of them, or contend with them. A number of texts by Agamben were translated for this issue – the epilogue of the Homo Sacer project, and several of the pandemic reports he wrote over the year – and they show his dual faces: the philosopher, theoretician, and erector of the comprehensive system, and the engaged intellectual who reacts weekly during a crisis. It is interesting to read them side-by-side and see how the principled and conceptual formulation can help understand a concrete present reality of life, but also how the brief and unequivocal reports rely on a much more layered and complex array, with which one must be conversant in order to understand them.

In the juxtaposition of the quick and furious reports and the durable and judicious philosophy there is a call of alarm, a call of distress, and a call of action for this time, in the face of deepening systems of control and supervision, impoverishing human life, and the emptying of universities from their students and from study as such.

The issue begins with an article by Adi Efal-Lautenschläger, which unravels the common identification between the philosophy of art and aesthetics, and between art and visual art. After three centuries of an aesthetic regime, using Jacques Rancière's terms, in which art is understood as something subjected to the gaze of a sensual and receptive subject, the article demands a return to poiesis as the renewed basis of the philosophy of art. Thereby art would be understood as action and production, as creating a plastic reality measured by its products and not by its meanings. The paradigm of this art is theater, with its productive behind-the-scenes and mode of transfer from the domestic to the public sphere. In a series of translations-interpretations Efal-Lautenschläger places the poietic of plastic art – sculpting art – on the basis of staging habitudes (her translation of Aristotle's "hexis"). In this way, while reading the French philosophers Félix Ravaisson and Henri Bergson and going back from them to Aristotle, the article proposes a concept of art that cancels the separation between art and craft, between aesthetic and technique, between beautiful and useful; that renounces an art discourse centering on the artwork and the conditions of its presentation, and instead poses art as the sphere of manufactured things.

Gilad Reich's article discusses the artistic act from the opposite pole. It reviews how in the last decade numerous artists adopted the tactics of boycott, divestment and nonparticipation, and asks, what is the active mode of art that does not act? What is a work of art that refuses to work? Reich presents cases of removing works from exhibits and boycotting display institutions on political grounds, such as at the 2019 Whitney Museum Biennale in New York, and reviews the artistic and political genealogy of this form of (in-)action. He traces the transition from the art strike of the 1960s and '70s – by the Art Workers Coalition, and the general strike by Lee Lozano, which was steeped in class politics – to the activist art that flourished after the 2011 protests, and at the center of which was a personal or group refusal to display in various art spaces. The new refusal artists do not act only as artists but also as activists who direct their actions towards the social world; but by doing so they abandon their action in the art world as a sphere in which social work takes place. Socialist politics and the connection to labor organizations that were common

in the previous generation have been replaced by the politics of social movements and human rights organizations, which goes hand in hand with the establishment of neoliberal subjectivity.

Yoav Ronel turns his gaze in his article from strike to idleness, and asks what its meanings and functions are in the age of neoliberal capitalism. Supposedly, idleness is the opposite of the world defined by the duty to work, as much as possible, sometimes around the clock. But idleness is not the opposite of work: it is currently at its heart, in the sweeping waste of time common in many jobs and in a range of superfluous jobs. With the breakdown of the defined work frameworks, the collapse of the separation between work and leisure, and the transformation of people from workers to entrepreneurs engaged in self-work, idleness has become an integral part of the existing economic political order. Ronel asks in his article how it will be possible to release idleness from that order, a release that means not only liberating humans from work – as if you could still demarcate a clear outside of the work system, of producing surplus value, of competition – but also releasing idle time from the expectations attached to it, from the need to take advantage of it and realize it. To that end, Ronel distinguishes between that concept of idleness and the (revolutionary, of a collective subject) concept of strike, and from the concept of abstinence (the ascetic concept, of the subject of will, and one that leads to cultural creation) and suggests that idleness is a form of passive potentiality. His discussion, inspired by Agamben's writing, uses two examples from contemporary Hebrew literature – a novel by Noga Albalach and poems by Tahel Frosh – to contemplate both idleness chained to the productive order, and idleness as a radical shutdown of that order.

Ronel's article leads our issue to the local arena. It is followed by Michal Givoni's article that gives it surprising characterizations. The article identifies the basis of the political discourse of the Israeli center and left in the Netanyahu era with the demand to restore hope, and the attachment to it as a way to change reality. From the V15 movement in the 2015 elections to the Balfour demonstrations of 2020, from the national Blue and White party to the social-democratic Standing Together organization – all are invested in arousing hope and view it as a way out of the impasse in which the Israeli political system is stuck. Therefore, instead of understanding the political sphere out of the declared positions of its various players, Givoni proposes in her article to examine the political-emotional positions that give rise to the hope discourse, shows how it draws a spectrum that swings between hope and despair, and questions its possibilities and mainly its limitations. Then she turns to Rona Kenan's album *Orange Time*, and reads it as a cultural work that itself contends

with the hope discourse, and is not only captivated in it or empowers it; a work that understands the lapse inherent in the cruel investment in an always disappointing and manifestly disingenuous hope principle. Givoni's attention to affective aspects of the contemporary political discourse leads her to silence its extreme poles and offer more nuanced emotional depictions, in the middle ground between complete despair and redeeming hope.

Curator Ory Dessau defines the art portfolio in this issue as an in-print exhibition. "The Rovers" presents the work of seven artists, from Yaacov Agam to Mika Rottenberg, who left Israel at a young age and made their careers in the European or American art scenes. Therefore, these are artists who worked or work outside their homeland, who left their place of origin, who stopped working there; and the exhibit asks about the signs of that stoppage in their work. Sometimes their leaving of Israel is inherent to the work of art, sometimes its marks can be seen in the combination of alternative expanses or in aspects of unfixity, evasion, or withdrawal; and sometimes it seems like an external interpretive framework forced on the works. But by bringing the artists together, the exhibit raises the possibility of understanding Israeliness differently: not as an actual territory, infused with meaning and import, but as a mere station, abandoned or forlorn, whose marks have been erased. The gathering of these artists under the same neglected category points at the potentiality to depose Israeliness, in Agamben's terms.

As we went into lockdown in the second half of March, *Theory and Criticism* launched a series of online conversations broadcast live on The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute's Facebook page and YouTube channel. The conversations were about concepts from the keystone lexicon of the times: state of emergency, work and strike, contagion and gathering, the sick society and populism – in an attempt to open up the meaning of concepts that had seemed closed and absolute. In light of the health and political emergency, we tried to offer thought that arose in an emergency without responding to its political manifestations. But now that it has become clear that the coronavirus is not an event, not a threshold that will be crossed at a certain moment, or an abyss into which we were hurled, but rather an ongoing condition, a living space that cracked open and in which we reside, emergency has given way to a delayed reflection on the coronavirus situation. The portfolio of essays in this issue offers a number of perspectives on the changing political space during the coronavirus. It begins with three short reports by Giorgio Agamben, written during the first lockdown in Italy,

in the months when it was the epicenter of the pandemic. In these reports Agamben warns that the smooth transition to online learning marks the end of the studential way of life and the end of the university as an association of students. He discusses the suspension of social relations and political activity in order to establish “biological security” and protection of naked life without questioning the forms of life that must be protected. The three reports appear in reverse chronological order, and the last one, first published at the end of March, is reread now with the hindsight of the past months indicating the exploitation of the health emergency for petty political needs or major regime changes.

Avital Barak reviews the social landscape during the coronavirus through the question of movement. In contrast with the sudden and sharp suspension of movement – the movement of professionals and tourists, the movement of refugees and goods – which followed the global spread of the pandemic, she identifies systems of minor, diminutive and hidden alternative movements, ones that furtively subvert the order or respond to it; these are followed by large demonstrations that stretch the limits of the restrictions on movement. Barak calls these movements “social choreography,” and she discusses the unique choreography that developed at this time from the perspective of performance studies and thought.

Ruthie Ginsburg turns her attention to three photographs from different demonstrations that took place during the coronavirus period, and out of them reads the political logics embodied in those demonstrations. She argues that the transition from the television to the social networks, and their transformation into the central means of communication around which demonstrations are organized and in relation to which their visibility is constructed, changes the shape of demonstrations and turns them into spectacle demonstrations. But contrary to the negative meaning that Guy Debord attached to the concept of spectacle, which he saw as a mechanism of absolute separation of people from all political existence, Ginsburg wishes to show how spectacle functions as an instrument by the demonstrators themselves and as part of the political arousal.

Eilat Maoz looks at the Abraham Accords signed between Israel and the UAE in the last months, an issue that is seemingly unrelated to the coronavirus and only happened to occur at the same time; but actually, as Maoz explains, it embodies the changing economic and political logic of the time. The criticism of these accords from the left focused on Israel’s excessive power, the weakness of the Palestinians, and the new alliances in the Arab world. But Maoz focuses on “racialized capitalism” as the basis for the similarity between the countries and the agreement devised between

them – state capitalism including a rigid social division of labor on an ethnic basis, a diminishing of the concept of modern citizenship, and turning the state into an apparatus whose purpose is to increase national capital, and which holds many of its residents, however little they are invested in that capital, as hostages to a brutal ethno-class politics that supports that financial conduct. The present of the UAE is therefore the (unfortunate) future of Israel: a utopia of capital, a dystopia for many of its residents.

From the other side, Ori Goldberg offers a discussion of the emotional space created under the conditions of the coronavirus: the possibility of finding an other to attach to and love even in the hall of mirrors of quarantine and screens. Using a theological key, through discussion of a chapter from Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians – Paul, the great articulator of love as a social force in action – Goldberg seeks to go beyond the regulating social law on the one hand and the individual as its own goal on the other hand; the regime's state of emergency, and the individual's liberal freedom of action. At the coronavirus's moments of suspended standstill, with the undermining of belief in the past and hope for the future, love according to Goldberg is a glimmer of movement rife with possibilities, of a breathing totality that has the power to describe and not only narrate, the world differently.

The issue, which begins with a speculative article, closes with a philosophical section devoted to two prominent philosophers: Hegel, the philosopher of the early 19th century, and Agamben, the philosopher of the early 21st century. From Giorgio Agamben's extensive theoretical writing, we chose to translate into Hebrew the epilogue of his *Homo Sacer* project, a virtuoso text that looks at the entire project, summarizes its main devices, and states its philosophical and political implications. At the heart of the epilogue is the transition from the theory of sovereign power – that is caught in the structure of exception and involved in the dialectic of constitution – to the theory of destituent potential. It is a potential that is not actualized, and that exists through the possibility of not being realized and not becoming power, and it does so by way of suspension – strike and deposition – of sovereign power. In a discussion that goes through Walter Benjamin's critique of violence, the concept of relation in Duns Scotus's ontology, the suspension of the laws of the Torah in Paul's messianic theology, and finally Aristotle and the meaning of "potential" in his writings, Agamben at last poses a different concept of human life – life that is not separate from its form, a concept different from naked life subject to sovereign power.

The issue ends with a symposium on the occasion of the translation into Hebrew of the first volume of G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The translation by Roi Bar and Elad Lapidot, published by Resling, is a momentous intellectual event and its

reading raises many questions that relate to the areas of philosophy, theology, political thought and cultural studies. We approached four Hegelian scholars: Pini Ifergan, Azar Dakwar, Gal Katz and Michal Segal, and asked each one of them to write a short essay on the book and its translation, and then we brought the four of them together for a written symposium. The essays and the conversation range between a discussion of Hegel's philosophy – the dialectic procedure, the place of the other, and the status of absolute knowledge – and a discussion of the relevance of Hegel's thought at the present political moment and the significance of translating the universal spirit into Hebrew. A fierce debate ensued over the very possibility or desire to “return to Hegel” and to do so from the left, over the existence or absence of Hegelian thought patterns at the heart of contemporary political reality, and over various translation choices. The discussion of the book and its translation intertwine, so that the discussion of the translation of Hegel into Hebrew becomes a discussion of issues that arise from the book itself: the question of what that book is for itself goes through the question of what it is for us, who is its other and what it can be for it, and whether, as in Hegel's Phenomenology, all of those questions converge in the end.

This issue continues the line drawn in the previous issue and also emphasizes theoretical conceptual exploration and critical thought in Hebrew. However, it opens up to additional areas: it contains a section of essays on contemporary affairs, it delves into the thought of two philosophers, and several of its texts engage with art. The current issue also presents additional forms of writing: an exhibit in a printed format and a written symposium. The next issue, issue 54, will be devoted to thought from the global and Israeli South, the possibility of an epistemology from the periphery, and research whose fulcrum and point of reference are not the political and cultural center. These three issues, seen together, seek to express a wide range of theoretical writing and critical study. In order to continue expanding it, we continue to turn to the local intellectual community and invite articles and essays that will sharpen and deepen the philosophical, social and cultural discussion in Hebrew.

And finally, Orna Yoeli-Benbenisty, who was the associate editor of *Theory and Criticism* and was previously its editorial secretary, has recently left after many years on the journal. It is hard to encompass Orna's contribution: she is a gifted text editor whose mark is evident in every article she touched, and who in many cases managed to turn unruly drafts into printable articles. We wish her success in her future work at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. My thanks go also to Tal Kohavi for her support and help, Lidar Artzi for her meticulous linguistic editing of the entire issue, and Anat Shalem for her collaboration in every one of its details.