

## **Im/possible Representations, suivi de la réponse de Mario Belisle**

Dévora Neumark and Mario Belisle

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Cette photo que je n'ai pas faite

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## Im/possible Representations

Devora Neumark

One day short of the six month anniversary of the destruction of my home at the hand of an arsonist, I sat on Notre Dame Street, peeling beetroots, barefoot in a white dress<sup>1</sup>. At the time, it seemed like an appropriate gesture – it still does nearly four years later. The night before I decided to do this, I dreamt of my Russian grandmother's hands stained from the borscht made in preparation for Passover – the Jewish annual ritual marking individual and social redemption from oppression and victimhood.

On the street, in front of the gaping wound of twisted metal and glaring emptiness where my home used to be, accompanied by a steady stream of friends and strangers, I stained my hands with the gestural repetition of peeling. Peeling away, I was exposing the wound, exposing the core of the beetroot, my heart.

Once I knew I was going to go ahead with this, I asked my long-time friend Mario Belisle, a professional photographer, to accompany me and photograph the event. It was intuitively clear at the time that I wanted and needed him there for three critical professional and personal reasons:

**A NEW BODY OF WORK.** After having questioned the authority of memory and constructions of history in my artistic practice for over a decade, it was a stark and difficult task to deal with the absence of nearly all my work and personal possessions. Within a space of twelve hours, I no longer had any objects in which my memories were

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<sup>1</sup> This performance is entitled *S(us)taining*.

stored. Did I have enough trust in myself to know that all the memory I needed, was already within me? What would a new body of work look like? Sitting and peeling the beets with Mario's camera clicking away, I knew that I had begun answering these and other similarly anxious questions about my artistic practice and life.

**LEGITIMATION.** I knew that the camera would act as an authorizing agent for the performative intervention as a professional activity. The camera lens and the person behind it, tends to legitimate the action/event being documented. The availability and use of documentary processes have shifted the realm of the private into the personalized social sphere.

**BEING WITNESSED.** One of the key elements in the process of coming to terms with traumatic experience is being able to voluntarily tell one's story in the safety of a caring relationship – someone who is willing to bear witness, not act as judge or jury, nor try to investigate or resolve the situation. In the slow and laborious process of recovery, a fragmented set of wordless, static images is gradually transformed into a narrative with motion, feeling and meaning. Having Mario witness the repetition of the peeling gesture, having him visually record my telling and re-telling with the individuals who cared to stop by, was crucial in working through the trauma of the fire and its losses. Having Mario be my witness also meant that I could simply be. I could afford to live the experience fully and viscerally without dissociating, because I knew that I had someone I trusted record my willing testimony.

The series of photographic reproductions of my passage through this experience, registering my actions and interactions, emotions and transformations is proof of my needs having been met. On all three levels, the photography was successful.

On the six-month anniversary of the fire, the day after the beetroot peeling, I woke up to find that my hands looked and felt like they had been charred in the fire. Totally surprised, I had not been prepared for the oxidization of the beetroot juice on my hands. Every line, crevice and cell was scorched in color and pulsing raw sensation.

This trauma was too real to be a photograph, a documentation or in any way, representable. The overwhelming experience of seeing and feeling my own flesh charred, as if from the fire itself, was unasimilated. No narrative language, no existing mental scheme was available to me to permit me to incorporate the experience as ordinary narrative memory. I covered my hands, even from myself, for the next several days. This was trauma and traumatic memory without

the capacity for social engagement; not addressable to anybody; a solitary activity. Not capable of representation, or being shared, my flesh and heart was speaking and reflecting back to me – for me, alone.

## Re-cadrer le souvenir

Mario Belisle

Mon travail de photographe en est un de témoin, mais aussi d'acteur. Mon intrusion parfois bruyante dans l'univers privé de mon sujet (soumis) conditionne son état d'âme et chaque déclic de mon appareil lui donne l'élan pour se propulser plus loin.

La mémoire de la pellicule photo renferme des images mortes du passé qui ne me rendront jamais leur environnement original. En les re-gardant, je devrai fabriquer un nouveau cadre et, à cause du temps qui ternit les couleurs du souvenir, je réinventerai un autre contexte, une nouvelle histoire qui se conjuguera au je.

J'ai très peu de souvenirs de l'événement rappelé par Devora. Certes, lorsque je regarde les photos prises à l'époque, je la revois pelant ses betteraves, mais l'image la plus frappante qui me vient à l'esprit n'a jamais été prise : c'est celle où je photographie Devora pelant ses betteraves devant une maison qui n'existe plus.

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*La démarche artistique de Devora Neumark fait intervenir à la fois la photographie, les performances de longue durée, les storytelling personnelles et les rencontres sociales.*

*Mario Belisle est photographe à la pige auprès de diverses corporations.*