

Sublime Survival \ Rona Cohen

Nature, to the artist [...] is merely the imperfect reflection of a world existing not outside him but within.¹

Friedrich W. J. Schelling

Time and Testimony

Time Container (2013) and *Turgor* (2014), two video works by Eyal Segal, address the affinity between time and memory at a place where memory persists and won't let go, and where time – as understood of by St. Augustine's in his *Confessions* – is a space of *distentio*, a movement of the soul that extends and stretches out from the past to the present. Contrary to the scientific conception of time conceived as an abstract geometric line, a steady and linear vector that acts outside the subject, indifferent to human experience, Augustine removed time from the domain of indifferent objectivity and constituted it as a phenomenological-psychical dimension. Rather than a linear vector that determines the past as that which has devolved and the future as that which is about to, for Augustine time is a phenomenological dimension, with the past showing itself as the present state of things that were – that is, as memory – and the future as the present state of things to come – that is, as anticipation. With time construed as a psychical-phenomenological dimension, memory appears as an emissary of the past, an image that manifests in the present time the being of things past; and so, says, Augustine, “my childhood, which is no longer, still exists in past time, which does not now exists. When I recall its images, and speak of it, I see it in the present.”² For Augustine it is the mental impression of events that occurred that allows us to conjure them in our mind's eye, being as it is that a movement from the past to the present cannot render that event in itself, but only its mental imprint as an image.

This essay examines the two video works of Segal's from the prism of the question of memory and the image. Unlike Augustine's philosophical reflection on the nature of one's own memory, Segal's works concern the Other's memories: In *Time Container* he brings forth his father's memories and in *Turgor*, his grandmother's. Segal's works elaborate a complicated discussion around memory when regarded through the relationship of the subject and its Other; in both cases the works open up a space of testimony which presupposes two, a teller and a listener; and in either case, it is a story of survival, a struggle of life and death.

[1] Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, translated by P. Heath, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978, p. 232.

[2] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Saint Augustine's Confessions*, Lafayette: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001, 113.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben writes that “life bears with it a caesura that can transform all life into survival and all survival into life [...]. In another sense, survival has a positive sense and refers [...] to the person who, in fighting against death, has survived the inhuman.”³ For Agamben, the positive sense of survival consists in surviving the inhuman. Yet the inhuman, for Agamben, is not death in the sense of the natural fate that awaits every living being, but rather something inherent in life itself, the mark of death contained within life that threatens the subject with his own destruction, an evil beyond grasp that needs to be excluded from the human. Whether implicitly – as in the case of *Time Container* – or more literally – as in *Turgor* – both these works address the question of survival in the face of inhumanity, but they differ in that in the first, inhumanity is understood to be that of nature’s, while in the second it pertains to human nature. In *Time Container* the artist accompanies his father to the Port of Ashdod where he used to work as a seaman, to capture his memories as they arise from this renewed encounter. One story stands out in particular, that of surviving a life-threatening storm while sailing deep at sea. In *Turgor*, however, the survival is not that nature’s elements; paradoxically, it is a struggle to survive the inhumanity inherent in human nature. The video moves between simultaneously occurring past and a present, between his grandmother’s childhood memories from the Germany she grew up in when the Nazis came to power, and a regulated experiment in survival conducted by the artist. The grandmother’s testimony is delivered indirectly, by way of a survival scene mounted by the artist – a feat of survival performed in a controlled environment which, in turn, itself relies on the double nature of the inhuman: both as an element of the human and as that which must be alienated from it – in other words, absolute evil – and as nature’s own innate inhumanity. And it seems that Segal avails himself of the latter precisely in order to survive the former.

On the face of it, both *Turgor* and *Time Container* address the memories of the Other – memories relayed to Segal due to his position as “the listener,” a witness who, by virtue of hearing to them, lends them the seal of a testimony. Yet Segal does not come forth as a passive recipient, as a documentarist who seeks to neutralize his own subjectivity to allow truth to emerge from the speech of the Other. In fact, despite a clear documentary aspect in these videos, the stories are transmitted rather by way of the impact generated on him, by how the memories of the Other affect his own subjectivity as a “listener,” as the addressee of their testimony.

Both *Time Container* and *Turgor* address time in complex ways. In *Time Container* the question of time is conveyed through splitting space into two, using a video diptych. Shot under the sweeping prohibition to shoot on the port’s premises, the video documents Segal’s father on a return visit there, accompanied by his son. The choice of a diptych, of a split image showing two locations at the same time, conveys what Segal terms a “dual attention”. Similarly, the split image represents the duplicity of the son’s point of view as he regards his father on the one hand while enchantedly beholding the grand views of the port on the other.

[3] Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York: Zone Books, 1999, 133.

Hence, while the father is seen recounting his memories in one screen – notably, a particular memory of survival against all odds while sailing at sea, a struggle between life and death, man and nature, and human and inhuman – the second screen features sights of the port as it appears today, as a giant, industrialized metropolis of mighty cranes and containers that are shot against the wide horizons of the open sea. Both views are equally important here, as the work “cannot exist with its left eye alone, nor only with its right eye,” explains Segal. The past must reside alongside the present, the old beside the new.

Despite Segal’s own dual attention, the work encompasses two spatial positions, that of the father recounting his memories and that of the son as the Other of his father’s testimony. The form of a diptych appears to enable these two distinct positions of speaker and witness, as well as the space of a testimony that emerges with the very act of speaking, and which Segal’s art brings into visibility. By his very presence, the son allows a place for his father’s testimony to occur; and, by occupying the position of the Other of testimony, who by his attention grants the Other his subjectivity, the viewer, in turn, is also made witness of the memory, through the artistic act. The viewer too becomes a witness, someone who literally witnesses, who carries the responsibility of seeing. Segal duplicates his own position as a witness to delegate it to the viewer – a viewer who now, having become a witness, witnesses the artist’s experience.



Time Container, 2013, diptych, two channel HD video, 7'41"

Testimony is likewise at the center of *Turgor*. “Turgor pressure” is derived from plant biology, designating the process in which a low salute solution pushes against the cell walls. When a plant is submerged in a hypotonic solution, the uneven salt levels begin to generate osmotic pressure, which causes water to infiltrate the cell and increase its volume. As plant cells are surrounded by an outer layer – the cell wall –the inner pressure on the membrane is contained and growth is limited. In fact, the effect of “turgor pressure” helps the plant maintain its rigidity, facilitating the outward growth of young stems and leaves. But while vital for vegetal cells, turgor pressure can prove lethal to animal cells, which are impermeable to water and lack the protective layer of the cell wall. Hence, when placed in a hypotonic environment, osmotic pressure may cause animal organisms to burst.⁴ This potentially lethal imbalance is at the heart of the experiment conducted by Segal in *Turgor*, where he performs a headstand inside a low solute water tank. This practice is in fact a known method of torture, and it took Segal extensive practice to be able to perform it – that is, to withstand the torture – in a way that he could sustain the pressure while staying upright, head down in the water and perform it in Münster, Germany, sometimes dubbed “the city of water”. Münster is also the birthplace of his grandmother, Chaya Segal, who as a child was forced out of her native Germany when the Nazis came to power. Just as he returns with his father to the port of Ashdod, so in *Turgor* he returns to Münster – but this time accompanied by his grandmother’s memories, to endure the ordeal of the “water torture” in front of the Zwinger, a historic building used for torture and executions during WWII. As he performs his feat, we hear in the background a tune sung by his grandmother, as well as ambient birdsong captured on the scene while we hear the sound of the artist holding his breath before submerging himself in the water.

Whereas in *Time Container* past and present are split across two locations, in *Turgor* the two temporalities are superimposed, compressed into a single image as it were, a “dual attention” co-occurring at a single place. The controlled experiment conducted in *Turgor* – a ‘performance,’ to use the artistic term – doesn’t involve, as in *Time Container*, a battle against an external vector – the hostile elements of nature in its immensity – which threatens the life of the organism, but a pressure operating from within, a vector at work inside the organism threatening to bring it out of balance; while the vector that operates from without – that is, the historical circumstances that necessitated survival in the first place – is designated by staging this experiment in the city of Münster. Yet here the city becomes the backdrop of a different kind of survival, a struggle against a force that exerts its pressure from the inside; the distinction between inside and outside, psychical and historical, is blurred as the external pressure coming from the outside – that is, historical circumstances – situate the subject in danger of an internal disintegration How is the organism to survive in such conditions? The solution offered by Segal, and that is arguably as the center of *Turgor*, is what he calls “becoming vegetal.”

[4] It is interesting to note that in scientific literature, turgor pressure is often referred to as causing a distension of the cells, the same term used by Augustine for to describe temporal distension.

In Agamben's discussion of *The Physiological Researches* by Xavier Bichat, he points to the fundamental fracture that, according to the eighteenth century physiologist, exists in every organism, to a co-presence of two "animals" in every organism: "First there is the animal that exists on the inside, whose organic life is comparable to that of a plant, and then 'the animal living on the outside,' whose life – which is the only one to merit the name 'animal' – is defined by its relation to the external world." According to Bichat, "the fracture between the organic and the animal traverses the entire life of the individual, leaving its mark in the opposition between the continuity of organic functions (blood circulation, respiration, assimilation, excretion, etc.) and the intermittence of animal functions (the most evident of which is that of dreaming-waking); between the asymmetry of organic life [...] and the symmetry of animal life [...]."⁵ Bichat, claims Agamben, was concerned above all with "organic life's survival of animal life, the inconceivable subsistence of 'the animal on the inside' once the 'animal on the outside' has ceased to exist." But when we speak of the survival of bare life, asks Agamben, what is it that survives, actually? Is it the human or the inhuman, the animal or the organic? The disjunction between human and inhuman, between organic and animal – the internal fracture – provides Segal with a way of solving the dilemma of the survival scene that he enacts before our eyes, a scene which ties together both types of survival: that of nature and that of inhumanity.



Turgor, 2014, documentation (Photography: Peter Kaiser)

[5] Agamben, op. cit., 152.

According to Agamben, the lesson to be drawn from Auschwitz can be summed up in the following: “The human being is the one who can survive the human being [...who has the] inhuman capacity to survive the human.”⁶ In view of *Turgor*, I shall try to reinterpret Agamben’s claim as a claim on this inhuman capacity – an element of inhumanity contained in the human, that is, the organic, animal and vegetal – as that which grants the human its capacity to survive the inhuman. In Segal’s work, this aspect is highlighted by the fact that it isn’t his body that he abandons to peril, but rather his organism. The risk taken is condensed to the level of the cell, to a broken balance between in and out – much like the solution he offers, of “becoming vegetal”. Only by virtue of this inhuman capacity – of turning oneself into a plant – can he survive the ordeal of the inhuman. Speaking about a more recent work of his, Segal says, in the same vein, that he is in search of the place where the human and the natural interact and interchange, and that such an interchange between the human and inhuman can only take place when human nature and nature are at close proximity, where the human apprehends the inhuman not as an otherness exterior to him, but as an internal part that comes to emerge by way of alienation.

On the level of the cell, beyond the pleasure principle, torture becomes something of a meditative moment; putting one’s life as risk can validate, precisely, one’s own vitality.

Contrary to *Time Container*, where the father’s memories are being told, in *Turgor* – a work made wholly in homage to the excessiveness of testimony – the unsayable in the grandmother’s testimony remains outside the scene, unnarrated. As a video without words, the testimony manifests itself through action. Choosing an indirect mode of rendering for his grandmother’s testimony – a testimony that he had heard from her repeatedly, he says, when he was six, that is, the exact same age when her life was turned around due to the Nazis rise to power – he opt for a rendering by way of an act.



Time Container, 2013, diptych, two channel HD video, 7'41"

[6] Agamben, op. cit., 133.

Divine Survival

In his book *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel makes the claim that the category of the sublime has lost its place in contemporary art and discourse because we are no longer enchanted and overwhelmed – less so terrorized – by the great outdoors. The modern subject, he claims, has lost his fascination with the infinity of the landscape so dear to the romantic sublime.⁷ Following Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the aesthetic judgment of the sublime is predicated on an object that no longer resides in art, but rather in nature. However, from the very moment in which aesthetics, historically, break away from nature as the paradigmatic object, to turn towards the art object, the aesthetic judgment of the sublime turns to an art whose subject matter is nature – rather than to nature itself.⁸ In the second half of the twentieth century, and chiefly through the influence of Jean-François Lyotard, the category of the sublime, which in Kant's thought was tied to the "unrepresentable," i.e. to imagination's failure in embodying the ideal of reason, comes to stand for the crisis of representation in art and for the impossibility of testimony.

In *Time Container*, a work that engages with the tradition of the sublime in art, Segal confronts the viewer with landscapes comparable to the one described by Kant:

*Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening, rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their violence of destruction; [...] the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river, and such like; these exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might. But the sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height, and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.*⁹

With the aesthetic judgment of the sublime, the subject discovers in herself the ability of transcending her sensibility by means of reason, thus discovering in herself a capacity that would allow her to confront nature at its wildest. Both in *Time Container* and in *Turgor*, the human comes to discover his ability of transcending the human – however, not under the auspices of reason but rather by virtue of the inhuman, that is, of the vegetal.

[7] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

[8] This is evident in the work of eighteenth century painter Caspar David Friedrich and in that of nineteenth century painter William Turner, which were seen as dealing with the sublime.

[9] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by John H. Bernard, New York: Cosimo Books, 2007, 75.

If Segal's art engages in a dialogue with the category of the sublime, it is precisely through a return to Kant's original preoccupation with nature and with the subject that confronts it, in awe of its tumultuous and fearful enormity. Segal reverts to the sublime in a way that is fundamentally different from postmodernism's, which returns to the sublime through the category of the "unrepresentable" as a name which designates, in general, the crisis of representation. While postmodern thought extended the category of the sublime far beyond nature to include everything that poses a limit to our powers of presentation – a thought that was therefore associated with the likes of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and even Bill Viola, whose videos supposedly confronted viewers with a moment of spiritual transcendence – Segal's art confronts the viewer with nature's colossal expansiveness. Yet unlike the eighteenth century concept of the sublime, which presupposes a subject who looks at a stormy nature from a safe aesthetic distance – somewhat like the unrepresentable of the twentieth century sublime – Segal produces a third category. In his works, the subject is placed within the actual events, within the very struggle of life and death: among wild pigeons in a desolate silo, on a ship at a raging sea, or within a scene of survival played out in a water tank.

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno locate the first phase of enlightenment in the moment when man's cry of terror in the face of nature was transformed into an act of nomination. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the substitution of the screams with a name marks the attempt of appropriating nature, of giving man a sense of domination and control over it. In a different work of Segal's, *Sand, Storm & Lawrence Tree* (2013) a solitary tree planted in a desolate land is waving its branches in a desert storm. Unlike other works of Segal's, the scene contains no trace of the human. Here, the encounter between the human and inhuman is found only in the work's title, in the nomination of the tree – the *Lawrence Tree*, given to it after the story of Lawrence of Arabia. Yet Segal's act of nomination is not done in order to reify it, as in the process alienation between man and nature which Adorno and Horkheimer point to; a process in which man, in fact, is alienated from himself. Rather, it seems that for Segal, the naming of the tree is a means of pointing to the exchange between the human and inhuman, where the rendering of the tree as human is the reverse side of rendering the human as vegetal.

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