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Prodigal Son

Oded Hirsch broke away from the kibbutz on which he grew up to become an artist in New York. In his latest work—a project staged with the help of 120 kibbutzniks—he reckons with the world he left behind.

BY TOBY PERL FREILICH | Jun 3, 2011 7:00 AM



Still photo taken last month during the filming of Oded Hirsch's video project *There Is Nothing New*.

CREDIT: All photos by Lior Shustov

The kibbutzniks were needed to construct sets and props, hand-dye costumes, and act out a loosely adapted version of “The Way of the Wind,” an early Amos Oz story re-envisioned by the artist as a thoughtfully crafted “art spectacle.”

Scripted, story-boarded, and shot out of sequence, Hirsch's work is not exactly a “happening” in the purest tradition of performance art. Nor, because of its coherent narrative structure, does it quite qualify as video art, which tends to be fragmentary. Rather, Hirsch sees his work as a genre-bending hybrid of cinema and performance art. Whatever you call it, it's clear from all of Hirsch's work that his roots are in the kibbutz and that it is the terrain he mines for creative inspiration. He may be unsparingly critical of its sclerotic ideology and stifling atmosphere, but he celebrates its spirit.

In his current piece, Hirsch's intention is to direct this cast of volunteer kibbutzniks—wearing uniform white T-shirts, red socks, black boots and kibbutz-issue blue work pants—in an anguished yet absurd mission to “rescue” one of their own as he dangles helplessly from a mesh of wires slung between two electrical pylons.

Oded Hirsch, center.



As a child of Kibbutz Afikim, in Israel's Jordan Valley, artist Oded Hirsch is familiar with the region and its residents, but at a March meeting with members of neighboring kibbutzim, he had his hands full managing a suspicious and, at times, hostile crowd. “Just what are you trying to do,” they asked, “exploit us? Make fun of us? What do you *really* think of us?”

The simple answer was that Hirsch, 34, was there to recruit volunteers for a two-day event he was planning to stage and film on a rocky, bramble-strewn hilltop midway between the ancient cities of Beit Shean and Tiberias.

In the original Oz story, the victim is an effete poet and dreamer, a source of profound disappointment to his father, a red-blooded Zionist, and one of the founding fathers of the kibbutz. When the son becomes trapped in the course of paratroop jump performed as part a military parade, the enraged father can only hurl insults at his terrified son.

The story ends tragically when the son, in a desperate bid to end the shame of his own cowardice, throws himself onto the electrified wires just as a young kibbutz boy, his chief tormentor, reaches out to snatch him to safety.

Hirsch pointedly veers from this ending and shifts the drama toward a final surge by kibbutz members who successfully get the victim aground, though it's never made clear if he's dead or alive.

Hirsch is intensely interested in the central Oedipal drama at the core of the original narrative (a theme he has explored in past work), but he adjusts the focus to the "how" of the rescue and the group effort it takes to achieve it.

The drama's participants include men and women, young and old, all drawn from the clusters of kibbutzim scattered throughout the Jordan Valley. What ultimately wins over this group of would-be actors is Hirsch's plea that what he is generating is not "merely" art but a communal event and, simply, that he needs their help.

Suddenly he has 120 people signed on. It's a weird reprise of the very subject of the piece: an absurd rescue of a kibbutz son who has rejected the kibbutz way of life.

Tangled feelings are at the heart of both Hirsch's life and art. Though his work has been received [warmly](#)^[1] in New York, his adopted home, he has barely exhibited in Israel nor has he ever received a shekel in grant money. His current project is funded by grants from the U.S.-based [Six Points Fellowship](#)^[2] and the [Jerome Foundation](#)^[3].

Ambivalence and ambiguity are, in a sense, his key raw materials: He's at his most comfortable straddling Israel and the Diaspora; the highly individual act of creativity and the community organizing it requires; performance art and cinema; the political and the personal; meaning and absurdity.

That intriguing uncertainty is evident in *Tochka*, a 2010 work currently on display at MASS MoCA in a group exhibit called [The Workers](#)^[4], an exploration of blue-collar culture, the friction between social classes, and the changing nature of labor in a global economy. Classical kibbutz figures in oversize field hats and blue work clothes are seen engaged in an act that is as physically grueling as it is irrational: constructing a primitive bridge across a ravine that could easily be forded on foot.

In this latest piece, ironically dubbed *There Is Nothing New*, there's a much easier way to accomplish the mission than the ingenious but circuitous effort devised by the rescuers: Just place a tall ladder under the trapped soldier and cut him down.

Instead, Hirsch's actors strain to bend the towers toward each other to relax the tautness of the wires that entrap the soldier, after laboriously digging enough dirt out of the rocky ground to form a mound high enough for him to rest on. It's his way of subverting the myth of the can-do pioneer and highlighting its irrelevance to contemporary kibbutz life.

Hirsch's main concern here is not the outcome but the communal effort required to achieve it—an inversion of the utilitarianism at the heart of kibbutz ideology. Though he rejects the pieties of the past, he has not given up on the value of communal enterprise.

This is a powerful statement in an age when three quarters of Israel's kibbutzim have moved away from strict socialism toward capitalism and privatization.





But in stark contrast to the easy camaraderie and light-hearted banter of the kibbutzniks in between takes, the mood generated by the spectacle itself is hardly warm and fuzzy. People seem to be working together here, but are they? There's no dialogue, no interaction, virtually no action. It's a communal act utterly lacking in communal spirit, and the feeling, deliberately, is one of alienation.

By underscoring the absurd, Sisyphean nature of the enterprise, Hirsch also drives home a point about the political scene in Israel today and the hollow resourcefulness of its leaders. "My generation is tired of politics," Hirsch said. "Nothing ever changes." If his

parents and grandparents had all the answers, his cohort has only questions.

This reflects a common attitude among the thirtysomething generation in Israel that has grown disgusted with a cigar-chomping, sybaritic political elite more invested in perpetuating their careers than in solving the country's problems. The political pendulum swings from right to left and back again, but peace is elusive, corruption is all too common, and social problems continue to fester.

Hirsch is one of a cadre of young artists acting out highly stylized, absurd tableaux as an expression of the surreal gap between Israel's well-oiled consumerism and its fraught existential predicament. He cites as inspiration Israeli performance artists [Guy Ben-Ner](#)^[5] and [Yael Bartana](#)^[6], whose works explore themes of home, belonging, displacement, and exile.

Yet for all the anomie Hirsch's work can evoke, the raw urgency of the country's founding generation bleeds through. For them, politics and collectivism were not a choice but a matter of survival. It was the crude but inexorable landscape in which they operated, and it's largely thanks to their pluck and ingenuity that today's generation can choose to opt out.

Though his work flirts with nihilism, there's nothing remotely jaded about Hirsch. Even as he takes pot shots at some of its shibboleths, he pays homage to the kibbutz ethos on which he was nourished, affirming a belief in "groups of people, anywhere, acting together to fulfill a dream."

As evening fell on the first day of filming early last month, the kibbutzniks gathered around a campfire to act out one of Hirsch's scenes. They were directed to sit quietly and gaze intently at a fire. But while the artist and his crew discussed camera angles, a kibbutznik pulled out a simple *chalil* and the group broke into a series of early pioneer songs.

These moments in between scenes, which Hirsch also records, are as meaningful to the artist as the film itself. They are also the occasion for amused exchanges between the participants:

"Do you get what he's trying to do here?"

"No. But I'm convinced it's going to be his best production yet."

By now their commitment to the project—and the artist—is absolute.

The kibbutzim's third generation is famous both for its defection from and its re-invention of the kibbutz. But one of the beautiful things about them is that no matter how far they wander they're never too far from home.

Toby Perl Freilich is a freelance filmmaker and writer in New York and Jerusalem. Her forthcoming documentary *Inventing Our Life: The Kibbutz Experiment* was [excerpted](#)^[7] in *Tablet Magazine* last year.

Article printed from Tablet Magazine: <http://www.tabletmag.com>

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[1] warmly: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/12/arts/design/12chance.html>

[2] Six Points Fellowship: <http://sixpointsfellowship.org/>

[3] Jerome Foundation: <http://www.jeromefdn.org/>

[4] The Workers: http://www.massmoca.org/event_details.php?id=631

[5] Guy Ben-Ner: <http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/43567/>

[6] Yael Bartana: <http://ps1.org/exhibitions/view/203>

[7] excerpted: <http://www.tabletmag.com/arts-and-culture/40940/together-again/>

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