Collective Forgetting: Permission to Forget

The editorial tracks the dual axis on which the issue rests: remembrance and forgetting. When erasure will never be complete, and forgiveness is not possible, what can collective forgetting offer?

Essay / Michal B. Ron January 6, 2025

There is an artwork by Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) entitled *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). Rauschenberg wanted to make an artwork based on erasure. He understood that the act of erasing his own work would not be sufficient. For the erasure to be meaningful, he had to erase a work whose importance was unquestionable. Rauschenberg made a pilgrimage to the studio of Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) on Long Island – a leading figure in Abstract Expressionism, who was then a spiritual father to the next generation of American artists – and asked permission to erase one of his works. De Kooning accepted the request and set a condition: the drawing he would give Rauschenberg had to be significant, a work that he would miss. It took Rauschenberg two months to erase the drawing that de Kooning had chosen and given him. The sheet of paper, in which traces of the erased drawing still remained, was framed by Jasper Johns (born 1930), who added an inscription:

Erased de Kooning Drawing

Robert Rauschenberg

1953

Was this an act of patricide? Not quite. When Rauschenberg erased the traces of his spiritual father's drawing, did he bring about his forgetting? The work also proves the opposite: the erasure perpetuates the vanished drawing by the father. The sheet of paper is the "Erased de Kooning Drawing," even after it became a work by Robert Rauschenberg in 1953.

Rauschenberg erased the traces of de Kooning – with the latter's blessing.1

Untitled-11111.jpg



[1]
Robert Rauschenberg, Erased de Kooning Drawing, 1953, drawing, traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame, 64.14 cm × 55.25 cm × 1.27 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Fair Use © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Collective Forgetting

Re-collective Forgetting

Re-Collect For-Get

Remind Forget

For-mind Re-get

"*yishar co'ach*" = Shkhoiach, which is the opposite of 'to remember.'[2]

What must we forget, to enter into a dialogue with each other?

How can one forget? Is it possible to "remember and not forget"? To not remember, and forget? How can "forgetting" be offered as a unifying theme for a special issue published – after the seventh of October?

During wartime?

In the midst of occupation?

After a Nakba? After a Holocaust?

Whom to forget?

The kidnapped?

The killers?

The dead?

Forget what?

Rape?
Killing?
Murder?

Oppression?

When to start forgetting?

2024. 2023. 1967. 1948. 1,400. 45,000. 100. 451 (452, 453 ...) ...

I forgot what I should forget, from all these memory attacks.

And so, the issue exists on a dual axis:

Memory and forgetting

Memory claims to remember what forgetting forgets, but even the one who remembers forgets that when he remembers, he also forgets. However, it is very difficult to dwell on forgetting. It is elusive. When one tries to linger for a moment on forgetting, memory immediately arises and places it – if only the memory that there is something that needs to be forgotten.[3] Memory loss, like in Alzheimer's disease, even forgets that it forgets.[4] Is this a curse, or a blessing?

Reading through the axes of memory and forgetting in this issue can begin with Amir Nassar's review, which weaves transitions between memory and forgetting in literature. Funes the

memorious, who forgets nothing in Jorge Luis Borges's story, would perhaps ask to bathe in the waters of Lethe that wash away the memories of souls, as Virgil and Keats describe in their poetry. Is a life in which nothing is forgotten a worthy life? Nassar wonders. Ra'ad Abu Sa'ada, who reviews Mahmoud Darwish's book *Memory for Forgetfulness* (1987), also writes that memory "is also another form of symbolic death", which imposes pain. Wadah Abu Jammah describes memory as a prison, and forgetting as accompanied by unexpected pain, because to forget we must repress or erase guilt or loss.

In the tension between memory and forgetting,

today the landscapes are the forgotten, argues Matt Hanson in a review of art events in peripheral sites in Turkey last summer. The global art world promotes a certain critical practice in a site of international guest artists who are concerned about historical and environmental issues of dispossession. However, the cost of this trend, and of the tourist economy that drives it, is the loss of recognition of otherness and the forgetting of the identity and uniqueness of the local environment, with its particularity. In contrast to the poetic and abstract artistic practice in foreign sites in the context of Turkey's tourism market,

one can place the brutal monuments of "contemporary colonialist sculpture", which David Behar Perahia and Dan Farberoff are photographing in Israel's Negev. This is the site-specific aesthetic testimony that remains after the Israeli authorities demolish unrecognized Bedouin villages. The Israeli act of demolition and removal seeks to forget the Bedouin desert heritage and its existence in the present. Conversely, the Bedouin community, with exceptional resilience, stubbornly forgets that its Sisyphean struggle against State cruelty is doomed to fail, making adjustments to the limitations and continuing to maintain its heritage. In their work as the Common Views Collective, Behar Perachia and Farberoff seek to forget the boundaries of fear and hostility between the communities living in the desert and learn from the Bedouin heritage to imagine a sustainable future together.[5]

To act as an artist, one must forget the boundaries of what can be described in the existing political reality.

Erasure, like that of a Bedouin settlement, is indelible, Shira Wachsmann reminds us. In her video work, the word Zerstört, which means "wrecked" in German, is seen engraved on a concrete floor. The artist's attempts to erase the traces of the inscription do not succeed. They reveal the word "ort" - place, and "stört" – to disturb. Even the attempt to demolish a house that is not recognized as a house, in the instance of the State of Israel against the Bedouins in 2024, or to erase a place that is not recognized as a place, in the case of Palestinian villages in 1948, is doomed to failure. Shira discovered the word "destroyed" in Israeli maps, which in the 1950s updated the British Mandate maps.[6] They indicate in English the Arabic names of settlements that were, and the update in Hebrew in parentheses: (destroyed). The maps are cut into wigs for the skulls in the digital collage she has assembled: one does not see, the second does not hear, the third does not open its mouth. Years are inscribed on their foreheads: 1948, 2024, 1967. Who are these skulls? Who is the harbinger of death, and

The skull also appears in Käthe Kollwitz's etchings. The mother struggles with Death, appearing here as a skeleton, while the child clings to her.[8] In another drawing, the mother is the one holding the dead son. When we read the works as expressing devotion to sacrifice, we repress Kollwitz's fear of death from bereavement and loss, claims Victoria Hafetz. Hafetz also identifies the fear in herself, when she seeks to rewrite her own body. Is gender matching an act of forgetting? Of erasure? For a new present and future, Hafetz must let go of the past. There is a tension in creation: drawing is a way not to forget, even erasure remains present. Art is a way to perpetuate. But for creation one must let go.

who is the dead?[7]

The power of art and literature to preserve memory, while struggling for life,

also arises in Ra'ad Abu Sa'ada's reading of Memory for Forgetting by Mahmoud Darwish. Following the book, Sa'ada asks about the use of collective memory in the construction of Israeli and Palestinian identity today. In Israel, the Holocaust, as a historical event, serves as a warning for the future. Unlike the Holocaust and the role of documentation in historical memory, the Palestinian Nakba heritage is a tool in an ongoing struggle, and it is transmitted mainly orally.

Nour Said claims that the absence of the Palestinian narrative story puts it at risk of being forgotten. It emerges from her words that to tell the Palestinian experience, Palestinian cultural creation is required, which is difficult to imagine in the living conditions of Palestinians living in the territories of historical Palestine or refugee camps.

It is challenging to imagine intentional collective forgetting. This is required in the case of the gender discourse, Heifetz argues, and the recognition of gender change. Wadah Abu Jamma'a navigates in his reflections between the rigidity of memory and the dilemma of forgetting. He asks: Is collective forgetting by a people possible? Is it possible to have a shared forgetting by two peoples embroiled in a bloody feud?[9] Abu Jamma'a's surprising, revolutionary, radical idea about "collective forgetting" is what has inspired the title of this special issue.

For Jacques Derrida, forgiveness must be exceptional, verging on the impossible.[10] In order for it to exist, Derrida sets down several conditions: the one asking for forgiveness must be responsible for the criminal act he committed. The crime committed must be unforgivable. Only the victim can grant forgiveness, and it must be devoid of any interests. Not even for the sake of receiving compensation. Not for a better future. Not even for the emotional gain that closure will provide. Such Derridian forgiveness seems impossible, but, by definition, it will be true forgiveness only under these conditions. One can borrow from Derrida's conditions for forgiveness, the conditions for permission to forget. The offender wants to forget his actions, but the victim will remind him of them. The victim wants to forget the trauma, but it comes back. It seems that only collective, active, agreed-upon forgetting between offenders and victims will be valid as a step recognizing a shared past, towards a future present to be built together.

Special thanks: Without Reem Ghanayem, the Palestinian voices would not have been heard in this issue. Thanks to her, participants in this issue were gathered, signed by their name or under a pseudonym, from within and against the circumstances of the war in Gaza.

The artists Raida Adon, Aysha E Arar, and Fahed Halabi generously contributed the images that appear along the texts. We are grateful for their attentive reading and willingness to accept our request to weave their works within the essays.

Thank you, Tohu editorial team. Leah Abir, Reem Ghanayem, Avi Lubin, Safra Nimrod, and Nir Har'el, for your efforts in editing, translating, producing, and making the layout for the issue on an impossible schedule in a year in which "time is out of joint."

We thank the authors and artists who were thinking with us on forgetting and showed us its many faces. Thank you, Tuçe and Korhan Erel, Constanza Mendosa, and Saad Abu Ghanam, for your time and deep conversations. We thank the participants in this issue: Amir Nassar, Matt Hanson, David Behar-Perahia, Dan Farberoff, Shira Wachsmann, Victoria Heifetz, Raad Abu Saada, Nour Said, Wadach abu Jamma, for your trust, for your thoughts, and for the materials we have here in front of

us.

- 1. Robert Rauchenberg, Erased de Kooning Drawing, 1953, SFMOMA [2]
  Gregor Stemmrich (who has recently been my PhD advisor),has published a 1028-page book dedicated to this single work:
  Gregor Stemmrich, *Robert Rauschenberg's Erased de Kooning Drawing (1953): Modernism, Literalism, Postmodernism* (Hatje Cantz: 2024). On page 927 of the book the author discusses memory, forgetting, and erasure. He quotes Bernard Stiegler:
  "Just as territory only exists when it is crossed, memory exists only when it is recalled." (Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, vol. 2, Disorientation*, trans Stephen Barker, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2009, 117.)
  And Stemmrich continues this line of thought: "Stiegler's analogy of memory and teritory suggests the idea in relation to *Erased de Kooning Drawing* that the crossing out of a territory was permitted for the sake of its existance as territory – and the effacement of what was preserved for the sake of its existence as what is to be preserved in the manner of its effacement." 927-8
- 2. From an email by Dan Farberoff, 27.5.2024:
  Hi Michal,

  On the topic of forgetting, something I remembered after our conversation. Early this morning, towards the end of my first night in Athens, probably due to the many "Shkhoiach" graffiti I saw during my visit in Israel, I woke up from a dream and wrote the following words:

  I always thought that "shkoiach" was short for "yishar ko'ach" (meaning "good job" or "well done").

  Now it appears to me that "shkoiach" is actually the opposite of "yizkor" (meaning "remember" or "may their memory be blessed"). To forget by force. Seems possibly relevant to me.

  Dan

- 3. When forgetting is discussed philosophically, and this discourse is rare, it is conceptualized relative to memory, as a failure of it. See:
  Matthew Frise, "Epistemological Problems of Memory," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/memory-episprob/ [3]>. The entry "memory" *in the Dictionary of Untranslatables* is considered next to "Forgetfullness." Jean Bollack, "Memory / Forgetfulness," *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. and ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood (Princeton University Press, 2004), 636-?
- 4. Tuçe Erel, who edited Tohu's previous special issue, raised, in consultations with her on June 18, 2024, on the preparation of the issue, the subject of Alzheimer's disease: "In relation to the larger context, maybe this could give you another angle in your thinking about these medical terms, dementia and Alzheimer's, and look at them in literal and metaphorical ways. How do these medical situations impact the larger context?"
- 5. I would like to mention here the book by the Bedouin poet Sa'ad Abu Janam *The Wail of Memory,* self-published, 2023/ From the poem "Reading poetry is like local anesthesia:"
  "Yesterday and tomorrow become darker and darker with each / word that memory erodes in a titanic struggle."
- 6. Dan Farberoff and David Prahia Behar also use such a map in their work.
- 7. Children also appear in Ra'ad Abu Saada's article. He mentions photos shares from Gaza on social media, pictures from the past, showing children in clean clothes, or from the present, of children laughing amongst the ruins. David Behar-Perahia and Dan Farberoff also

present a photograph of Bedouin children standing on the ruins of their village. The children were playing, Behar-Perahia emphasized, in conversations about editing the materials.

- 8. The flame that rises between the skulls in the collage is reminiscent of the fire in the Bedouin "shig" (a traditional hearth/gathering place), around which those gathered tell stories and hold discussions. The *shig* fire appears in the works of Farberoff and Perahia-Behar. In Waxman's work, it is the shig fire, the tribal bonfire, that rages out of control.
- 9. Now People A and People B, discussed by Abu Jama'a, are imprisoned in their memory, like an hourglass laid on its side, where no grain of sand moves. See the artwork *Suspended Time* (2007) by the Palestinian artist Taysir Baetniji: : https://www.taysirbatniji.com/project/suspended-time-2007 [4]
- 10. Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, trans.,(London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 25-60.

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