

Sadism, Politics, Exorcism
On Roe Rosen's *Out (Tse)* and *The Death of Cattelan*

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The two works by Roe Rosen on view at the Riccardo Crespi gallery in Milano – the film *Out (Tse)* [2010] and the 16 pages of the series *The Death of Cattelan. A Story in Stereo* [2011] – represent some of the recent outcome of an artistic production which in the last twenty years has freely explored and intertwined the media of writing, drawing, painting, photography and film, giving birth to a wide variety of works which include illustrated books such as *The Blind Merchant* [1991] and *Lucy* [1991-92], pictorial cycles such as the *Martyr Paintings* (1994) and *The Professionals* [1994-1996], a “virtual-reality scenario” such as *Live and Die as Eva Braun. Hitler's Mistress, in the Berlin Bunker and Beyond* [1995-1997], the production of the entire oeuvre and critical reception (paintings, drawings, a novel, a critical essay) of the fictional artist *Justine Frank (1900-1943)* [1998-2005], as well as films which include, besides *Out (Tse)*, *The Confessions of Roe Rosen* (2008), and *Hilarious* (2010).

As a passionate viewer who has been following Roe Rosen's production almost since its beginning in the early 1990s, looking back I can find a number of recurrent motifs, attitudes and obsessions which one can detect also in the two works currently on view in the Riccardo Crespi gallery. The intentional setup of complex reading/viewing conditions which deeply engage the spectator, inviting him/her to adopt an attitude resembling a participation in a game in which all identities are going to be redefined. The belief in the political power of ‘black’ humour and of provocation, which led Rosen's works, on several occasions, to be the center of public controversies. Finally, the constant desire to blur any sharp boundary between apparently opposite poles such as reality and fiction, innocence and guilt, victims and victimizers, developing a provocative reflection about the nature of Jewish identity and the ideologies behind current Israeli politics. Drawing from an eccentric variety of sources such as Shakespeare's plays, Christian Saints' iconographies, Nazi emblems, French and Belgian Surrealism, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, B movies, Freud's observations on humor, as well as an ever-present pornography, Roe Rosen has produced over the years a body of work whose fascinating iconographic and political complexity can be experienced in the two works currently on view.

The Death of Cattelan. A Story in Stereo is a clear example of one of the recurrent traits in Rosen's work highlighted above: conceiving the artwork as a “machine,” or *dispositif*, which redefines according to its own rules the acts of reading and viewing. Here, the spectator is involved in a game in which he or she struggles to extract meaning from a multi-layered work in which two texts overlap. The ‘lower’, ‘initial’ layer is made of a series of pages scanned or redesigned from a host of different sources: Kafka's *Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way*, a poll from the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* about whether or not Arab Israeli citizens should be accorded a right to influence Israeli foreign policy, a *New York Times* article about WikiLeaks' founder Assange, Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, an advertising of a private jet company, a marriage announcement in *The New York Times*, a short fairytale from the Brothers Grimm, *Haaretz* report about an Israeli attack on Palestinian civilians, a self-quotation from *The Confessions of Roe Rosen*, a page from the *Golden Legend* about Saint Catherine... By circling in each page a number of letters in red and blue – the change of color marking a new word – Rosen creates his own, parasitical text, which the viewer deciphers excruciatingly, letter by letter. Slowly, a story begins to emerge about “art celebs” flying to Congo, a plane crash, and Cattelan's body being found dismembered in the jungle... The scanned pages are surrounded by floral ornaments and an iconography directly related to the two layers of the text, juxtaposing the severed head of Cattelan with the torture wheel of the martyrdom of Saint Catherine.

The second piece in the exhibition, *Out (Tse)*, is centered around a sadomasochistic scene which is not acted but literally *performed* by two women who are actively engaged in the BDSM scene in Israel. At the beginning of the film, in an interview with the main characters, they are presented as clear-cut opposites: dominant and submissive, active and passive, leftist and rightist, masculine and feminine... As the action progresses and the violence unfolds, the opposite poles gradually become blurred, and the meaning of the central scene appears to be transformed. The peace-seeking, leftist young woman is shown in the act of repeatedly, violently thrashing the rear of the submissive who, in turn, proceeds to utter phrases that are direct quotations from the militant, racist speeches of Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs. What was supposed to be an act dedicated to the search of pleasure

through pain, inflicted or received, unveils itself as a form of exorcism, connoting references that span from Counter-Reformation religious practices to popular films such as *The Exorcist*.

As in most of Rosen's works, the body here is a site of pleasure and violence, and the voice, rather than being the straightforward expression of consciousness, is a layered, multi-faceted conduit which resists any form of unification, projecting its troubled, fragmentary nature on the identity of those who speak and those who listen. In *The Confessions of Roe Rosen* the artist asked a number of characters – his son and three illegal immigrant workers – to recite his 'confessions' in a language they did not understand (English and Hebrew), thus separating sharply the signifier from the signified, the words uttered and the awareness of their meaning. The characters behaved as if they were 'ventriloquized' by a voice coming from the outside. The same happens in *Out (Tse)*. At the peak of the exorcism 'ritual', moving swiftly across different pitches, the voice of an inner 'demon' seemingly bursts out. But where is it coming from? Where is, truly, Lieberman? Is there a 'Lieberman' hiding also in those who would seem to oppose him most sharply? And where are the Liebermans that are present in many current political scenes, outside the borders of Israel? We as Italians are invited to answer as well.