

A Conversation With Joseph Sassoon Semah



On Friendship / (Collateral Damage)
The Guardians of the Door | Art
performance by Joseph Semah
(Amsterdam) and György Dragomán |
Millenáris, Building B | Photo by
Oliver Sin

Joseph Sassoon Semah: Before we begin, there is something important I would like to mention. You see that I have changed my name to Joseph Sassoon Semah.*

Zsuzsanna Szegedy-Maszák: And why is that?

□□*JSS:* Beginning on the 20th of October, my name will be Joseph Sassoon Semah as a reflection of the third exile project. I was born in Bagdad. As a family, we were displaced to the State of Israel, and now I am a guest in the West. My grandfather was the chief rabbi of the Babylonian Jews who lived in Bagdad. So I thought that instead of explaining my background every time I would just add the family name Sassoon so people will understand.

□□*ZsSz-M:* You often talk about being in a state of self-imposed exile, or rather as a guest. How does your art reflect this?

□□*JSS:* I read to the idea of the guest through my mother tongue. For me the guest is not just a friendly person who comes and you let him stay in your home for five days. The guest is someone who stays and works for the good of the whole

world. Remember, in Hebrew, we don't have the word exile. To begin with, גלות, or GaLUT, is not Exile, nor is it Diaspora or an existing place; GaLUT is simply a disciplined activity, an intensive vision, and it is what GaLUT does – it transforms each and every temporary מקום, MaKOM or place of shelter, into a perpetual search for a Hand Full of Soil.

☐☐ZsSz-M: You mentioned that your mother tongue is Hebrew, and in a previous interview you mentioned that visual art is in fact a second language for you.

☐☐JSS: The Hebrew language is my home. Where can I dwell? In language itself.

☐☐☐☐ZsSz-M: The manner in which you approach art seems very textual to me. You speak about reading artworks through the Hebrew language. You regard artworks as 'footnotes'. You recite or read texts aloud during your performances. What is your relationship to literature or to texts? Do you approach visual art from this textual stance? And a follow up question: do you regard music in a similar, textual manner?

☐☐JSS: The first time I used a musical score in my art was during my inquiry into a very important moment in history: the meeting between Paul Celan and Heidegger in the Black Forest village of Todtnauberg on July 25th 1967. I placed the two images on a Wagner score, so I used it in an intellectual way. Music to me is textual. I am not an artist of a gallery. I cannot reproduce an image on demand. I call my artworks 'footnotes' to a text, but in fact they are part of the text.

ZsSz-M: You dismiss modernist aestheticism and claim that every form has symbolic meaning. Who can be your audience? Does your audience need to be well informed?

☐☐JSS: I will tell you a secret now. I made a decision early on, when I was still living in Berlin. I decided that the form I will use as a footnote, the artwork, will always be beautiful. If you don't look properly, you see a beautiful drawing, but if you look closely, it's an aggressive letter I wrote to Albert Dürer exhibited here in the Lena and Roselli Gallery stand. I had a very good friend who always used to say to me: "Look, I don't understand what you're saying, but I find it so beautiful." My public can be someone who reads it or who will read it eventually. The text is always there, but the footnote is aesthetically always charming.

□□□ZsSz-M: There are some recurring motives in your performances and installations, eggs and candles for instance, and you also have recurring numbers. Can you tell me more about their symbolism?

□□JSS: Yes, for example the 36 eggs refer to the flame and to Duchamp's bicycle wheel. I do have some questions concerning Duchamp's explanation of the idea of readymades; for instance, in one of his last interviews he said when he spins the wheel in his studio he sees a flame. To my astonishment, bicycle wheels to this day always have 36 spokes. A bicycle has two wheels, so together they have 72 spokes which corresponds to the 72 Names of God. The wheel with flames is called the ophanim. Of course one could ask why there are always 36 spokes, who decided this? Maybe the Freemasons? Another example is the shape of the knot in men's ties, which is the same as the inner section of the Star of David. So when I watch the news and I see all these important men I see the Star of David. Our task as guests is to read these forms which are symbolic for a certain group. 36 refers to the 36 secret, righteous persons in the Jewish tradition. But no one knows who they are, they themselves don't know. I correlated this to the wheel and to Duchamp's readymade.

ZsSz-M: How do you view the issue of politics in your works? Does your work become political in the course of its creation, even before it's exhibited?

□□JSS: My work is always political. Most of my work is specific to my so-called home town, to Israel. Yet most of my work I cannot show in Israel. For instance, the work which analyzed the Tefillin (the box worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers) and its concealed texts was formed with meat. The meat was a mix of pork and beef, and it offended even secular Jews. Even those who said it was beautiful said they couldn't look at it once I told them. A priori, one should not do it. It was political before it became an artwork. I am less and less fearful. At an earlier time, I was so fearful that my texts were very complex, but now they are less complex.

□□ZsSz-M: Does your condition as a guest allow you to be less fearful, or protect you from being less fearful?

□□JSS: I never thought of it that way. I am not an outsider. At first, they called me the Jewish artist from Amsterdam, but after I complained, they began to refer to me as a Dutch artist. I have been accepted now as a higher guest, although I do

not know how they will react after the Stedelijk Museum performances.

ZsSz-M: *The Guardians of the Door reflects on Martin Luther. Were there other historical figures who interested you in a similar manner?*

□□JSS: *The Guardians of the Door* is an artwork the length of which is about 1.8 meters. In the Jewish tradition, God, the divine force, the text is the guardian of the doors. When you enter the house of a faithful Jew, they have a symbolic object, the mezuzah, above the door. I changed it, because now we the artists are the guardians of the Door of the institute. And Margriet Schavemaker of Stedelijk Museum understood this perfectly, and she wrote about the meaning of the Guardians of the Door in our book. Until now, the artist has been the person who waited until someone came to their door and said I like your work. Now there is a new kind of artist, who says "Look, what you're doing is not correct." I guard everything.

□□ZsSz-M: While I was watching the performance yesterday, it seemed very structured, the end tied up with the beginning, there were identifiable acts, the audience was continually engaged, always on its feet. It seemed very theatrical. Do you have a background in theatre?

□□JSS: Linda Bouws, (ref., Metropool Internationale Kunst Projecten/Studio Meritis MaKOM) has a background in theatre. Many friends of mine came from a background in theatre. Theatre in the good sense, in the sense of the evocation of a text. The performance was not really structured, because in a way everybody was free to improvise, they knew the point of departure and when they were supposed to end. The guy on the bicycle who led the group timed his stay in our environment and his walk around the building, and his return was timed, but otherwise he was free.

ZsSz-M: You and György Dragomán read texts aloud. Dragomán read from his own book *The White King*. What were you reading?

□□JSS: He was reading the chapter on Africa, a section in which an eleven-year old boy plays chess with a black man, who turns out to be a robot. While they play, he hears his mother screaming for help. I read the poem I wrote when my father died. I was in the corridor of the hospital and I reflected on the death of my father as a metaphor for my separation from my country, from Israel. I was reading to him and he was reading to me. The text was in Hungarian, my text was

in my language, and it wasn't important to understand them, the important thing was the emotion. And of course we were playing chess in the meantime. He played chess the way he wrote his novel. Simultaneously, the violinist improvised on Bach, unfortunately there was no microphone next to the sewing machine, so you couldn't hear it well enough. It wasn't easy to sit here in Hungary and read a text in Hebrew and criticize Luther without you knowing, but as a guest I am always protected.

□□□ZsSz-M: From your interaction with the author it seemed that the performance was about trust and friendship. Who suggested inviting Dragomán? Did you know him before the performance?

□□JSS: György Konrád is a very close friend of ours, but he was unable to participate in this performance yesterday. Then Lena immediately suggested Dragomán to us, and although he didn't know me before he immediately said he would do it. I told him that as part of the performance we would play chess, but not simply chess, but chess which relates to the whole issue of faith and unfaith, to city and guest. He gave me a section from his book, and when I read it I almost cried, he writes so beautifully. I immediately thought it was very similar to a poem I wrote in 1979.

ZsSz-M: So you decided to read your poem from 1979 after his text was selected?

□□JSS: Yes. As a guest, one has to be very open to the sound of one's hosts. In a way, the two texts are very similar. I also speak about the king and the queen on the chess board while I played with father and how he did not want to play anymore when he was dying. This was a memory from my childhood, which I related to a soldier coming back from the war, because I also had to spend time in two wars.

□□ZsSz-M: How come Dragomán didn't have a box on his head?

□□JSS: He wasn't offended, but he did ask me "Where's my box?"

□□ZsSz-M: And the candles?

□□JSS: There are ten candles, and their placement on the box follows the architectural plan of the Temple of King Salomon.

□□ZsSz-M: Do you often collaborate with other people?

□□JSS: I don't like the word collaborate. I invite my friends, I never invite actors, this is not a theatre production. For me it's collateral damage. It's happened before that someone stops speaking, because it's always emotional, because they are not actors.

ZsSz-M: When you read these works of art by Duchamp, Malevich, Beuys or when you make references to Martin Luther and Dürer, you're summoning, reviving tradition. Can contemporary art do that? Should it?

□□JSS: We were just discussing that this morning. This concerns the question of the artist's task. Should it be to enlarge the happiness of the middle class? In the same way, I am not a producer of replicable forms of artworks, that's why I call it footnotes.

ZsSz-M: How long have you worked with Lena?

□□JSS: We met fourteen years ago. She was present at the opening of my exhibition *Ich bin, der ich bin: EHYeH ASheR EHYeH* at the Museum Gerhard Marcks Haus in Bremen. Three months ago, she contacted us, but apparently she had always wanted to collaborate. We love her without even knowing her.

□□ZsSz-M: Thank you very much for taking time out of your day to talk to me.

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