

MOCA

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
CLEVELAND

NEVET YITZHAK

OFF THE RULING CLASS

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Nevet Yitzhak creates multi-media installations that absorb viewers in the construction of new narratives. Using found imagery and archival materials, her works challenge perceptions of the past and raise questions about history, conflict, and collective memory.

Yitzhak traveled to Cleveland in early 2015 to explore the city and view objects held in local collections. She was struck by The Cleveland Museum of Art's Auguste Rodin sculpture *The Thinker* (c. 1880), which was bombed in 1970. While questions still remain about who executed this destructive act, many attribute it to the Weather Underground, a radical left-wing organization. Then CMA Director Sherman Lee decided to leave Rodin's original cast unadulterated, and reinstalled the damaged work in its original location. In its mangled state, the sculpture bears witness to a period of violence and political unrest during the Vietnam War.

Yitzhak's new work takes the form of an installation with two videos. *OFF THE RULING CLASS* shows an animated 3D model of the sculpture, somberly contemplating its metal limbs and ruptured base. The title was drawn from the graffiti left on the sculpture's plinth the night of the bombing, a clue to the vandals' motivations. *THE ANTITHINKERS* takes the shape of a research journal, combining archival photographs, video, and newspaper clippings with new documentation of the sculpture's annual conservation. These works connect the trauma of the explosion to Rodin's original inspiration for the figure: the Poet in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1320), contemplating the value of art in light of human failure and suffering. Through *The Thinker*, Yitzhak explores the emotional effects of cultural terrorism and the power of icons in secular society—issues that remain extremely relevant in light of the increased destruction of ancient artifacts and monuments in the Middle East.

The following interview took place in August 2015, as Yitzhak was putting the final touches on her new work.

Rose Bouthillier: How would you describe your process? How does a work begin for you?

Nevet Yitzhak: I prefer to work with found footage and archival material—that is partly a philosophical decision. I really do think that it's more “environmentally friendly.” We have a huge vault of images and narratives—all the things that belong to our history. I feel it's important to dig there, to raise questions and also to build alternative narratives. Orientalism and post-colonialism are important historical and socio-political forces that I investigate with my work. Once I become interested in a subject, I begin to study and gather as much information as possible: images, video, records, texts. This research takes a lot of energy. The work

begins to develop and evolve from the footage, shaped by the ideas that emerge. On the more technical side, my role is more of an editor than a director.

RB: A lot of your work touches on violence, at times literally but often allegorically. Why are you drawn to conflict as a subject?

NY: Living in Israel, which has been very troubled for a long time, affects your way of looking at the world. The atmosphere is very violent, even when it's not wartime, and that finds its way into my ideas and my work. Politically speaking, I believe artists, especially from our area, can't escape from it. We need to ask questions about it, and to deal with it.

RB: Why is vandalism of art a vital topic today?

NY: It's always been an issue; iconoclasm has been going on for millennia. But it's coming into consciousness now with the destruction of monuments and artifacts in Syria and Iraq. The need to destroy art objects proves that they do have special meaning—even to people within a secular culture, they are significant symbols.

RB: Why did you decide to focus your new work on *The Thinker*? What do you find most compelling about this statue and its history?

NY: Narratives drive my work. Sometimes I begin with a text, article, book, or a story like the one about the CMA's *The Thinker*. I saw a lot of works in the museum but this one has a story. This event connects it to a different place in time, and it can bring you back to the 1960s and 70s. It also raises a lot of questions about art—what it symbolizes to different people and how communities create identities around it. To choose an artwork as the target of a violent act confirms that art is very powerful, that it holds status and significance.

I have been thinking a lot about Dante, and thinking about Rodin thinking about Dante. You can imagine the Poet looking down into Hell, seeing all of the pain, suffering and corruption—you can really imagine it, visually. But there is also such a powerful connection to the American psyche and the Vietnam War. You think about the visuals of soldiers coming back, many without limbs. It's kind of ironic that that happened to *The Thinker* too. In my work, that political aspect is more of a subtle element. That gives me the freedom to develop a more surreal take on the subject.

RB: The title for the installation is *OFF THE RULING CLASS*. Can you talk a bit about why that message intrigued you?

NY: “OFF THE RULING CLASS” was written on the plinth when the sculpture was blown up—it’s a small detail that is minimized in records. Perhaps that was done deliberately, making it a great choice to put front and center as a title. The graffiti suggests that, to the people who bombed it, *The Thinker* symbolized the ruling class, traditional culture, and the point of view of the bourgeoisie. It’s a strong statement. The act was violent and brutal, but the idea behind it is very important. Many believe that the Weather Underground did it—they weren’t regular vandals, committing senseless acts. They had things to say based on deeply held beliefs. And some will say they were able to affect change. I do have respect for the idea behind the revolutionary mind of that time. They wanted to bring war home so that people couldn’t ignore it, going to sleep peacefully and living their convenient lives. I wanted to give a place to the statement as well. It suggests the motivations of the act, which inform the reaction and provide another layer of meaning to the care and conservation.

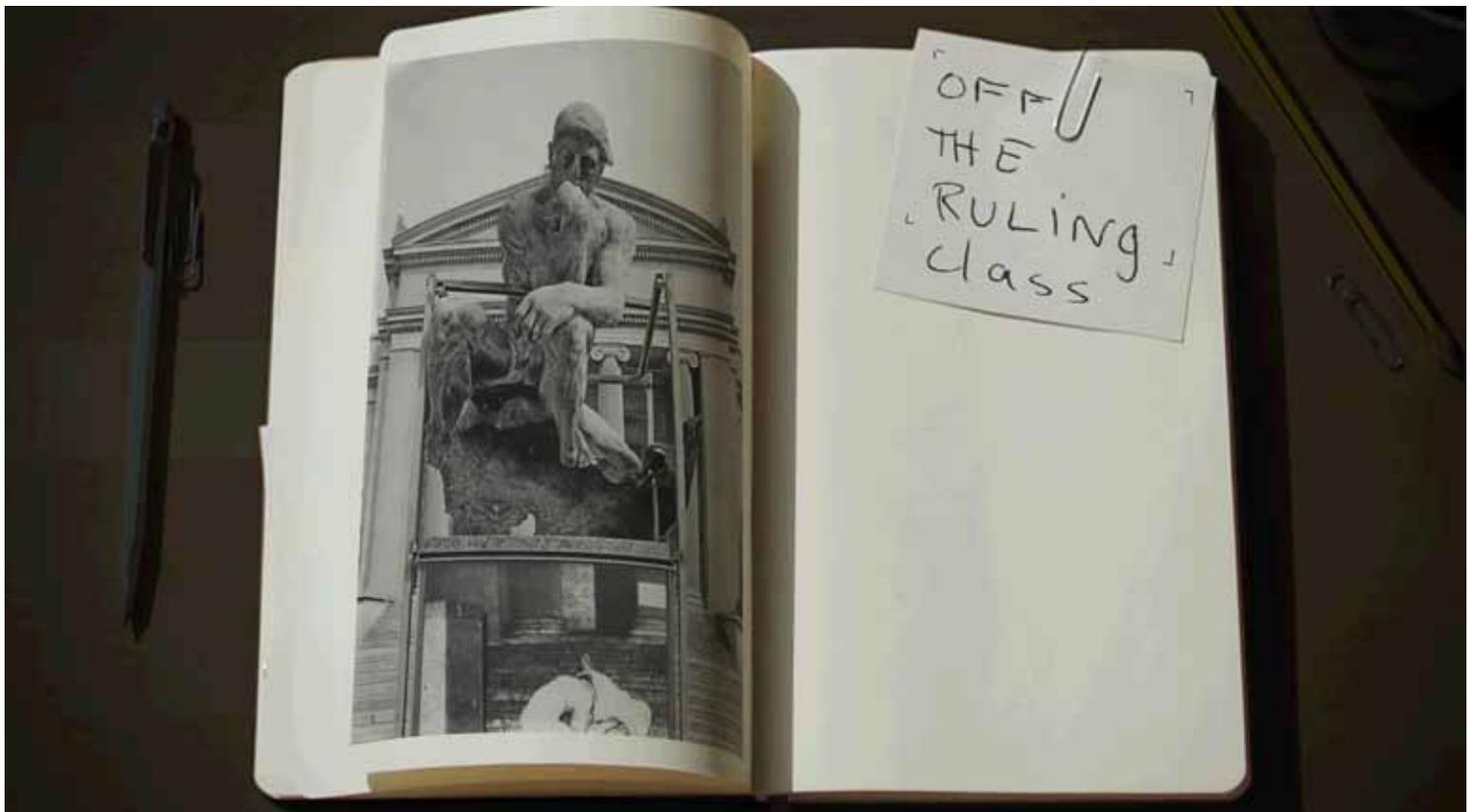
RB: In addition to powerful, seductive visuals, sound is an integral aspect of your work. Where does that come in?

NY: I think that sound and music are even more significant than images for communities as a source of identity. In my work, the sound is developed from the very beginning with the visuals. Right from my first look at the letters in the CMA’s archive, I imagined the sound of voice-over readings in my head. I also knew that Franz Liszt’s *Dante Sonata* (1949) would be an important element. It’s the audio-image that

really has an impact on viewers—sound and visual working together.

RB: You’ve talked about your approach to this piece as a “love letter.” Would you say that your work is inherently romantic?

NY: I want to think that my work has, in some way, sex appeal. That it operates on an erotic level. My project on *The Thinker* deals with a lot of information: conservation reports, images, documentation—information that might not be interesting or alluring. Going through details on details on details, after a while I began to search for the intimacy in the little things, all of the little notes and actions by particular people. For them, these details are crucial decisions and procedures. They had great respect for the artist that made this sculpture, and for art in general; they thought about Rodin and worried and wondered about what he would have thought. Eventually they arrived at the decision, which was a great decision to make, to leave it in its destroyed state. It’s a very romantic story. The personal also comes through in the format of the piece, with the appearance of a book or a note pad. When I was doing my research, I printed all of the texts and images out, and assembled them in a book. So, the video delivers the subject in a similar way to how I experienced it. The annual conservation process is also quite intimate. The conservators we filmed were all women, handling this large figure. These actions are full of care and convey a love of art, a deep respect for art.



Nevet Yitzhak: *THE ANTITHINKERS*, HD video, stereo sound, 00:10:00. Videographer: Jim Zunt. Archival images and video: The Cleveland Museum of Art; the Yasinow family; Northeast Ohio Broadcast Archives. Animation: Itai Goren. Sound: Louis Kentor plays the *Dante Sonata* by Franz Liszt, recorded in 1940; Librivox recording of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Part 1: Inferno,” read by Cori Samuel. Courtesy of the artist; Yossi Milo Gallery, New York; and Noga Gallery, Tel Aviv.



COVER AND ABOVE: Nevet Yitzhak, *OFF THE RULING CLASS*, 3D animation, 00:10:00. Animation: Itai Goren. Courtesy of the artist; Yossi Milo Gallery, New York; and Noga Gallery, Tel Aviv.

NEVET YITZHAK

OFF THE RULING CLASS

September 17, 2015–January 10, 2016

Organized by Rose Bouthillier, Associate Curator

Nevet Yitzhak (1975) lives and works in Tel Aviv, Israel. She holds an MFA from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design. She has had solo exhibitions at Yossi Milo Gallery, New York; NOGA Gallery, Tel Aviv; Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem; Herzliya Museum for Contemporary Art, Israel; and Petach Tikva Museum of Art, Israel. Her work is held in the collections of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Tel Aviv Museum of Art; and the Shpilman Institute for Photography, Tel Aviv. In 2014 she was awarded the Biata S. Kulimer Prize from the Israel Museum, and in 2012 she was awarded the The Shmuel Givon Prize from the Tel Aviv Museum and the Creative Encouragement Award from Israel's Ministry of Culture.

SPONSORS

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