

Ilit Azoulay
*No Thing
Dies*



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The Stories We Tell Ourselves

The first cultural device was probably a recipient. ... Many theorists feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier.

—Elizabeth Fisher, *Women's Creation*¹

We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction"

In the notes to the book that was subsequently published under the title *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf introduces a new form of glossary, based on a restructuring and reorganization of the English language, with the aim of highlighting fundamentally different and untold stories. These are previously overlooked, ignored, forgotten, and often feminine narratives, that can now finally be heard by reconsidering the vocabulary at hand.

The entry for the word *heroism*, for example, is recast in the glossary as *botulism*. In Woolf's writings, the idea of the hero is replaced by the word bottle—not only in the strictly narrow sense of a bottle, but in its broader etymological sense of a container. In a similar vein, Ursula K. Le Guin—known for her visionary works of science fiction—later described this as "a thing that holds something else." Her search for alternative narratives is related to Ilit Azoulay's work, in that both raise the question of how we impart forgotten and overheard stories, in the face of the dominant form of narration. Both ask how else might we tell a story, and how might those stories gather us in.

Azoulay's point of departure for the project *No Thing Dies* was a collection of individual and personal stories gathered over more than three years of research in the archives and storage rooms of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Her conversations with the staff of various departments of the Museum revolved around the history of collecting, and past and contemporary

¹ Elizabeth Fisher, *Woman's Creation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), quoted in Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," *Dancing At The Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), pp. 149–154; reprinted in this volume.

approaches to the Museum's collections. These conversations were then rendered as large-scale assemblies of photographic works that brought together objects, artifacts and artworks — some of which had previously never been seen outside their hidden and nearly forgotten storage spaces. These objects, which had never before been featured in the visible, institutionalized exhibition spaces, and the rooms that contain them, are the blind spots of the Museum, yet are an integral part of its history and encapsulate Azoulay's approach to her oeuvre.

Azoulay's work retraces the web of associations cast by these numerous unseen objects, and relates their stories that up till now have usually languished untold in the basement of the museum. Bound up with these is also the work of the archivists, conservators and curators. The particular period in which *No Thing Dies* took shape is also relevant, because it came together at a time when the Museum's founding members — many of whom had helped build the collections — had either retired, or were about to.

Making the neglect of marginalized narratives within the institution apparent and calling into question the presupposed objective integrity in its role as a historical archive, Azoulay's works mean that the museum's history and method of collecting — throughout all its departments — have to be revised and re-defined, and certain facts and objects remembered. Indeed, questions arise about the role of the museum's staff and its involvement in the process of building a collection, given that many objects were stowed away in the Museum's archives upon arrival, and little of the collections and the works they contained was made publicly accessible in the exhibition spaces.

The Museum's Department of Islamic Art and Archaeology holds an archive of Persian miniature books that mark a formal and structural point of departure for Azoulay's body of work. She became interested in Persian miniature paintings — especially their underlying and defining structure — because they far transcend their role as illustrations of a text, in that they are vestiges of the storytellers once employed by ancient rulers. They are pictorial, non-textual transcriptions of past power structures — political events rendered as literary content. The illustrations themselves served as storytellers, while also attesting to a direct financial link to those who wished their stories to be told. This narrative tradition, and its historical importance as a visualization of political and social conditions of the time, are the structural element underpinning Azoulay's compositions.

Remarkably, Islamic miniature painting continued to evolve, even in the face of the severe iconoclastic tendencies of Persian culture. The earliest paintings can be traced back to late antiquity. The miniatures' primary role, it seems, was to serve as text-based illustrations, to make the narrative more readily understandable. More importantly, however, they served as artistic extensions of poetry, because they provided a poetic symbiosis of image and

written word. Due to their complexity, few of these stories of intertwined text and images are available in translation in Europe. Even a work as pivotal as *The Book of Kings* — a national epic by the Persian poet Abu l-Qaṣīma-i Firdausī — has only been partly translated and contextualized as part of today’s canon. As a result, the miniatures and their respective textual sources appear to us as enigmatic containers of narratives that appear to diverge fundamentally from conventional Western notions of history and its representation.

The Persian book illustrations present the viewer with a dazzling array of simultaneous occurrences, with several centers of attention and focal points of action within a single image. Evenly spaced across the work, they avoid any division between “center” and “periphery.” One must “witness” these images, rather than merely look at them and explain them. The narrated past, present, and future appear to overlap, resulting in a diverse and plural gaze that is heightened by a sense of movement in the scenes, which is achieved not by depicting human figures or elements of the landscape in a state of motion, but rather through what Oleg Grabar, a renowned scholar of Islamic art, refers to as a *circuit of gazes*. By tracing multiple perspectives, one may be able to grasp the illustration’s central meaning or connotation.

In Azoulay’s (*Take, for instance, this*) *true story* (2017), the objects appear almost suspended in mid-fall — as though they had been placed on a horizontal structure which was then tilted, their normal figurative appearance upended as they tumble toward the observer. In the upper part of the image, one sees a structured storage container made up of small grids holding miniscule objects, superimposed by small stone tiles inscribed with Arabic lettering, two of which have broken away from their original setting and appear to be free-falling across the image. These cracked and damaged tiles suggest not only movement, but also offer a fragmented portrayal of the dynamics of the tradition of the stories — albeit with no distinction between banalities of everyday life (such as a shopping list) and epic accounts of occupation, death, and war.

There is an underlying structure to the contemporaneity of different narratives that is evident throughout Azoulay’s body of work. In form and in content, they transgress and elude a single linear narration. This contemporaneous nature of multiple realities that overlap and engage with one another in the image constitutes multiple realities and possible narratives, in which things appear to adhere to the underlying logic of Persian miniature painting, with its diverse coinciding realities and time folding past, future and present into the narrative’s duration.

This absence of a dominant narrative in a work that features a multiplicity of authors and voices becomes a political strategy of refusing to appoint a single center or hierarchy. By retaining a diverse view of the past that always appears to arrange itself in relation to the present, Azoulay’s work adopts the particular

structures of Persian miniature painting and applies them to a contemporary context. This is where the potential of untold (hi) stories expands: intricate, complex and fragmented stories are put forward, which otherwise are usually left behind by the historical canon.

Azoulay's images and their surfaces become the setting for these complex stories, where detailed accounts can be told in polyphonic ways. The apparent absence of a linear perspective (of the sort that has prevailed in Europe since its discovery during the Renaissance) is a striking feature in Persian miniatures and a hallmark of Azoulay's work as well, as evident in (*Take, for instance, this*) true story. This is by no means a stylistic shortcoming, but a formal intention. The purpose of the Persian miniature books and their images was not to imitate nature, but to idealize the literary characters and those who commissioned them, as the latter were the subject of their imagery. Accommodating the perspective of more than a single individual allowed for far greater artistic freedom. The result is an engagement of opposites, such as wide and narrow, inside and out, high and low, and even the temporality of now and then. History intrudes into the present, and constitutes its own reality, in which future, past and present are layered and juxtaposed, without hierarchy or judgment.

This approach to telling a story in Azoulay's *No Thing Dies* calls to mind Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," reprinted in this publication. This text is a feminist critique of traditional conventions of scientific research, and a humorous analysis of conventional narratives that often marginalize complicated, multi-layered, and feminine content. From her viewpoint as a science-fiction writer, Le Guin examines not only which histories have been preserved, but also the form of the story itself. Contrary to the widely accepted belief that human storytelling began with accounts of a male hero setting out to kill and hauling his prey back to an expectant family sitting by the fire, she puts forward an alternative concept of narration as a container for words and meaning. Le Guin's approach brings together the history of humankind, technology, storytelling, and aesthetics into a single narrative. Azoulay's structural approach is similar in its attempt to allow unheard and fragmented stories a place to be heard, thereby raising the question of how we tell stories, and how those stories might bring together objects and subjects within them.

Le Guin's text opens with an explanation of gender relations in early human society in Paleolithic and Neolithic periods. She describes the typical routines of people at the time, and proposes that the earliest forms of human life were defined by the practice of gathering—as opposed to hunting, as commonly believed. In her description, she proposes that the first cultural apparatus was a container: a vessel of some sort that allows other things to be collected and stored inside. In the wider sense, a container is

an object that encourages thinking about the future, and assumes the role of a memory device insofar as it contains, holds, carries, and transcribes. Le Guin's text is both a rejection of the claim by conventional history of science and cultural studies that mankind's first tool was a weapon, and an assertion that the first invention was most probably not a weapon, but a story—a container of words. The narrative we are accustomed to is a distinctly masculine one that ultimately leads to a single climax, such as the brutal excitement of slaying a mammoth. An alternative narrative, she suggests, would consider, for example, the task of gathering nuts and berries—as befits a society of gatherers, rather than of hunters. Such a narrative would give rise to other stories, featuring repetition and patient commitment, often by women. A pictorial account of hunting on cave walls was only one way of telling stories and featuring protagonists, and Le Guin reminds us that those are not the only narratives to be told.

Azoulay's work offers a contemplation of stories and of storytelling, on several structural levels. It is the method of her approach to the process, as well as a hallmark of the artworks themselves—a structure of questioning, listening, writing, and transcribing the stories told by the museum's staff and by the hundreds of macro-photographically documented objects. A poignant example of a "conflict of narration," literally depicted on an object's surface, is the Pomegranate—a recurring documented object in the *No Thing Dies* series. It sums up the importance of attributing a given history to an object, or the consequence of its removal. A mere 43 millimeters in height, it was once a key object in the Museum's collection, when it was reputed to be, according to researchers and the Museum's presentation, the sole surviving relic of the first Temple of Jerusalem. Discovered in 1979 in a tiny antique shop in Jerusalem, it attracted enormous attention and gained national importance when it was brought to the Museum, as material proof of the controversial history and existence of the first Temple. It was discredited, however, when subsequent analysis of the object's patina found it to be an imitation, dating not from the Iron Age period but most likely from the Late Bronze Age—that is, much more recent than previously believed. Like many other objects deemed of little worth in absence of narrative value, it has remained stowed away ever since, half-heartedly, in a cardboard box in the Museum's archive, for Azoulay to discover years later.

Azoulay's practice is nourished by listening: she is a listener who creates more from stories than from actual objects. That is why she chooses to create works not from the stories that are commonly known and told, but from those that she herself chooses to listen to. These stories materialize on the surface of her work, where they engage with all recipients, listeners, and storytellers. It is a practice not only of storytelling and engagement with various protagonists, but of dialogue with the earliest traditions of storytelling—Persian miniature painting being

one of them. Through her work, Azoulay constantly reconfigures what is contained in our carrier bags. She lays the ground on which to carefully open the container that we have already been carrying around for far too long. Unfolding it in front of her, she slowly and carefully lays out its contents, and adds to it a variety of forgotten and forlorn objects—things that reside at the margins of our sight, on the verge of being overlooked. She then ties it back together and places it, once again, in our hands.

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The curator makes a note in his notebook. The curator tells the artist: *We're not getting into that.* The artist tells her assistant: *Could you photograph two of those?*

The artist tells the curator: *We need another hour.*

The curator makes a note in his notebook. The artist approaches one of the dolls. The artist's assistant approaches one of the dolls.

The assistant curator approaches two other dolls.

The collection director rises from her chair.