

Sarah Zell Young is the 4th annual Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (HBI) Artist-in Residence. The 2012 HBI Artist-in-Residence Program is made possible thanks to the generous support of Carol Spinner at Avoda Arts and Arnee and Walter Winshall.

About the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute

The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute develops fresh ways of thinking about Jews and gender worldwide by producing and promoting scholarly research and artistic projects.

About the Women's Studies Research Center

The Women's Studies Research Center (WSRC) is a place where research, art and activism converge. The Kniznick Gallery is committed to feminist exhibitions of artistic excellence that reflect the activities of the Women's Studies Research Center Scholars and engage communities within and beyond Brandeis University.



Kniznick Gallery
Women's Studies Research Center
Brandeis University
515 South Street
Waltham, MA 02453
go.brandeis.edu/wsrc

Curator: Michele L'Heureux
mlheur@brandeis.edu
781-736-8102

SARAH ZELL YOUNG

Occupy Sanhedrin

March 29 - May 18, 2012

ABOUT OCCUPY SANHEDRIN & AS OLD AS THE WORLD

The term Sanhedrin refers to the Great Court of ancient Israel during the Second Temple Period. It was composed of 71 men, one chief justice referred to as the *Nasi* (prince), one assistant chief justice, the *Av Beit Din* (Patriarch of the rabbinic court) and 69 general members. This judicial body made binding decisions about all aspects of Jewish life in and beyond Jerusalem. The Great Sanhedrin is a prime example of an exclusively male space—not only in its physical gathering of 71 men, but in the scope of influence these men had in making decisions that ruled over all bodies.

We learn about the Sanhedrin in the *Talmud*, an elaborate six-volume documentation of laws derived from interpretations of the Bible. The *Talmud* is a dynamic document that begins with a text called the *Mishnah*, an explicit Biblical interpretation, followed by *Gemara*, which is a commentary on the *Mishnah*. The *Talmud* records the discussions and debates of many rabbis over the course of three centuries. These intergenerational discussions dissect the *Mishnah's* meaning and application.

In one section, titled “Tractate Sanhedrin” 36b-37a, the *Talmud* poses an explicit and surprising connection between the female form and the architectural arrangement of the Great Sanhedrin. In those pages, the description of the physical structure of the Sanhedrin is derived from a passage in *The Song of Songs* 7:3: “Thy navel is like a round goblet, wherein no mingled wine is wanting; thy belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies.” Why would the Great Sanhedrin reflect the shape and sensuality of a woman's body—and specifically her navel? What does it mean that the foundational structure of justice was envisioned using the female body as passive poetic metaphor? Why is justice tucked into the folds of the flesh?

The *As Old as the World* photographs engage in dialogues with these questions, physically juxtaposing the corporal with the Talmudic. I collaborated with two contemporary women struggling to find their places within Judaism: one who was going through an orthodox conversion process with a



beit din and one who was contemplating taking leave from rabbinical school. The ancient text is realized against the backdrop of these women's personal struggles between the space of contemporary rabbinic justice and justice prescribed in the ancient text. Their narratives become instrumental in revealing the space for personal agency between the Hebrew letters on the page and in introducing the active feminine subject into the Sanhedrinic structure.

The Sanhedrin has enticed many to return to its model of judiciary, including Napoleon Bonaparte, who reconvened the Great Sanhedrin in 1806 France to pass laws affecting all Jews living within the boundaries of his empire. Bonaparte's endeavor, though perhaps seduced by a false promise of utopian justice, exemplifies the permeable boundary of history. His Grand Sanhedrin gained its authority not just from the sovereignty of the state but from the sovereignty of history and its hold over us. In order to achieve agency over the present, we must look to history, as well, and claim it for ourselves. Friedrich Nietzsche writes, "To be

sure, we need history; but our need for it is different from that of the pampered idler in the garden of knowledge." Nietzsche invites us to cultivate our own gardens, to step away from a static view of the past. For personal history is the constellation of both past and present; we gain authorship of our history by confronting the past with an embodied present.

In the Great Sanhedrin, male bodies occupied the space of justice, fulfilling their roles as arbiters of justice in the court. Women were excluded from making any decisions of justice, even those that pertained to them. The word *Sanhedrin* comes from the ancient Greek *synedrion*, which translates as "sitting together in counsel." Hence, there is no reason why we cannot sit together now and occupy our own space of justice in the Sanhedrin or otherwise. In Hebrew, the word to sit, *lashevet*, also can mean to live or to settle land (occupy), so by sitting you are already occupying a space, both physical and psychic.

The act of sitting itself can be an inherently political act. Sit-ins during the civil rights era were a powerful force for social change. In Genesis 31:34-35, for example, Rachel hides Laban's idols by

sitting on them and telling her father that she cannot rise because she is menstruating. Cleverly, she made use of a custom designed to limit female jurisdiction over her own body to her advantage. Rachel gains agency by remaining physically still. One can look no further than recent news of male of politicians making decisions about women's reproductive choices to realize that the boundary between what is historical and what is contemporary is fragile. Agency over one's past, both inherited and experiential, can only be gained by taking the perilous journey into history and staking a claim to it. You are invited to create a counsel of justice for yourself and claim agency over your own body by sitting and Occupying Sanhedrin!

ABOUT ERVAH

In the *Talmud*, *Berakhot* 24a, hair is defined as erotic; this passage prohibits men from praying in the sight of a woman's hair because of its inherent sexuality. Derived from this text and others is the custom of married women covering their hair so that their natural hair is only revealed to their husband. In contemporary orthodox society, women wear wigs, called *sheitels*, to cover their hair in public. The *sheitel* uses the very thing that must be covered for the mechanism of that covering. In recent years controversy has developed over the ever-increasing provocative nature of *sheitel* styles themselves. For this project, a *sheitel* was made out of my own hair, not for the purpose of obscuring hair's erotic nature, but to pose the question: is the eroticism contained in one woman's hair transferrable to another? Can the sexuality of another be occupied/inhabited by wearing her wig? Women from the HBI and WSRC communities volunteered to don my *sheitel* and, by extension, perform my sexuality in this series of collaborative portraits.

— Sarah Zell Young

ABOUT SARAH ZELL YOUNG

Sarah Zell Young received her BFA in Sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design and is studying toward her MFA in Combined Media from Hunter College, New York. In addition to her art studies, she has studied Modern Hebrew at both Brown University and Tel Aviv University. Young has exhibited her work at many galleries in New England and New York, as well as internationally, and has completed residencies at the Vermont Studio Center and Drisha Institute for Jewish Education. She has curated exhibitions and delivered lectures on issues related to religion, feminism and the body, including a 2011 presentation at the University of Wisconsin titled "Making it Meaningful: Feminism, Body Art and Talmudic Text Study."

Image: *As Old as the World (Eliana)*, 2011