A Gesture of Erasure / Naama Haikin

The display in Yanai Toister's most recent solo exhibition, "The Keepers of Light" (2010), consisted of photographic prints in glossy color, printed in a 300x60 cm rectangular format and suspended vertically, side by side, on the walls of Tel Aviv's Dvir Gallery (figs. 1-2). The colors of the prints were determined by a fixed, computer-applied mathematical formula that started from primary red and progressed through orange, yellow, green and cyan to primary blue. The original model for these works was the façade of Dan Panorama Hotel in Tel Aviv, designed in 1970 by the artist Yaacov Agam. Toister initially sought to extract samples of Agam's colors from a photograph of the façade, but while doing so he discovered that faithfully reproducing the colors as prints on photographic paper was impracticable. He therefore rejected photographic extraction in favor of the computer and was thereby able to reproduce the rationale behind Agam's work, namely gradational transition from one color to another. The exhibition thus presented computerized simulacra that mimicked the logic of photographic reality while simultaneously abandoning it. It was a flamboyant, spectacular, all-encompassing finale to the move that lies at the heart of Toister's work, the logical conclusion of a carefully reasoned argument that he has been developing since his early days as an artist.

In one of the photographs from the series "Ahab" (2001), a black donkey can be seen standing behind a pine tree, tethered to it by a sinuous length of rope (p. 89). The donkey's bulk gradually blends into the tree's branches but the black blotches standing out between the thick green undergrowth transport this tangible portrayal into the realm of the abstract. It is an assimilation and a dissipation of the ostensible photographic subject taking place within the photograph

1-2 The Keepers of Light, 2010, 21 c-prints on
     Duraflex paper, 300x60 each, installation views at
     Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv
     The Keepers of Light, 2010, 21 תצלומי צבע על
     נייר דורפלקס, 300x60 כ"א, מראות הצבה בגלריה
     דביר, תל-אביב

itself. Likewise, the cyclists are absent from the frame in a brightly colored pastoral landscape from 2002 (fig. 3). Similarly, in a photograph from 2004, from the series "Register of Facts," which incorporates the margins of the film within the print, the impression of a painting is given by five severed tree trunks with patches of red scattered alongside (p. 91). In each of these three cases, a distinct photographic subject is conspicuously absent from the frame. It is replaced by a precise construct of "the quintessential picture," drawn from art-historical sources. Yanai Toister, a post-conceptual artist, deals with the nature of the photographic medium and formulates visual arguments with regard to its significance. At the outset of his career, he stated his position in the language of straight photography. Later, by means of digital technologies for photographic deconstruction

and reconstruction, he enriched and broadened the discourse in a manner that has implications for the way we read "traditional" photographs. Toister's stance speaks for and emphasizes the idea that a photograph is a structured space composed of aspirations and desires. It rejects the widespread perception according to which the subject of a photograph is a physical reality standing before a camera and recorded by light rays falling on film. Aiming to arouse a critical and active response to the photographic object, this position, which is expressed directly and indirectly in quite a few theoretical texts,[1] draws attention to extrinsic aspects of photography that determine its signification. Moreover, Toister frequently posits a novel physical-photographic aesthetic devoid of photographic subject as a valid alternative to the qualities of the photographic medium. Cases in point

3   Untitled, 2002, from the series "Straits," c-print, 65x80
ללא כותרת, 2002, מתוך הסדרה "מיצרים", תצלום צבע, 65x80

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4   9-Sheet Experiment, 2006-9, silver gelatin prints on drawing paper, 61x46 each,
     installation view at the exhibition "Pleated Blinds," 2010, Petach Tikva Museum of Art
     ניסוי בתשעה דפים, 2006-2009, הדפסי כסף ג׳לטיני על נייר רישום, 61x46 כ״א, מראה
     הצבה בתערוכה ״תורת השלבים״, 2010, מוזיאון פתח-תקווה לאמנות

are the works 9-Sheet Experiment (2006-9) – black-and-white prints that were exposed to light in a gradual and continuous process (fig. 4, and pp. 15, 46-49)) – and the colored photographic strips exhibited at Dvir Gallery.

Toister's work participates in this wide-ranging theoretical discourse. It would appear that there is no longer any doubt about a photograph being a space in which aspirations and desires are manifested – not only of the subject and the photographer, but also of industry, the establishment and technology. Since the earliest days of photography, diverse commentators have stressed the photographer's gaze and personal vision in an attempt to ground the medium in the field of art. On the other hand, and for commercial reasons, industry pointed to its ease of acquisition and use. At the same time, photographs have served as an ideological instrument for promoting the agenda of the regime and the apparatus of modern life. The drive to immortalize, to express one's talent, to realize a commercial or technological potential, to create policy,

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1   In this context a number of diverse writers may be mentioned, amongst them Walter Benjamin, who called for a political reading of the photograph; John Tagg, who directed attention to its ideological aspects; Vilém Flusser, who regards photography as a conceptual medium; Roland Barthes, who focused on aspects extraneous to the photograph; and Ariella Azoulay, who stresses the interpretative function within the photographic space and regards the photograph as a space of civil action.

5   <u>M</u>, from the series "KPU," 2008, archival pigment print on cotton rag paper, 90x159

<u>M</u>, מתוך הסדרה "KPU", 2008, הדפס פיגמנט ארכיבי על נייר כותנה, 90x159

to capture and possess another in a photograph, to approve or reject claims on the basis of photographic evidence, to organize society, to increase awareness and stimulate social action – all are human pursuits that are present and visible in photography. From the 1980s onwards, theoreticians emphasized these points and in doing so rendered the "invisible" visible: as a result of their work we can now say that photography shows everything! This is a fundamental standpoint for those who would contemplate Toister's works without discussing photography in negative terms. The singularity of Toister's work lies in its explicitly pointing at the relationship between the concept[2] (or, as Toister would put it, the photograph as the concept's emissary) and reality (the photographic subject) as one of violent erasure. In presenting conceptual modes that obliterate reality, it recalls the development of western idealist philosophy, as well as significant stages in the progress of modernism, with all its accompanying utopian and oppressive characteristics.

Three of Toister's photographs, facsimiles of originals preserved in the Hashomer Hatzair and Hakibbutz Ha'artzi Archive at Givat Haviva, depict modern public buildings on the grounds of a kibbutz (fig. 5). Their harmonious, formal and colorful aesthetic (achieved in part by erasing elements from the photograph) combines with the features of the photographed structures, whose style is clearly reminiscent of Le Corbusier. This is reflexive art that examines its own status: the so-called "ideal" photograph represents the rationale of modernism through other modernist models – kibbutz life as a utopian lifestyle, and the architecture of Le Corbusier, one of the fathers of modern architecture – thereby articulating a declaration of the modern spirit. In this context, Sharon Rotbard writes:

> What set him [Le Corbusier] apart was this drive…
> which repeatedly made him want to reinvent
> architecture and the world at large, to dictate the rules.
> It was the same impulse which drove him to assume
> the mantle of modern architecture's rhetorician and

to invent a new type of architect and a novel form of architecture, weaving that dense mesh which is the canon of his written manifestos, completed buildings and unbuilt designs.…Le Corbusier's structures are innovative because for the first time architecture takes it upon itself not just to be and *be seen* but also to *show* and *speak out* (emphases in original).**3**

Toister's photographs take it upon themselves to speak out about the manner in which modernism and photography attempted to mold reality as if it were a blank slate, occasionally even erasing it. In this sense, they positively seek not only to be seen but also to show – particularly the structuring of the image and the politics of representation, in all its violence. Toister's "architectural" photographs highlight the unadorned surface of Le Corbusier's white walls – they are akin to a blank sheet or photosensitive paper on which a photographic fantasy of utopian modernity may be played out.

As in Le Corbusier's Towards a New Architecture – a powerful, contentious polemic that manifests the modernist spirit (the pathos, the faith in rationality, technology and progress) as well as the brutal way in which reason treats reality – so too Toister's treatment of photographic paradigms (architectural photography, color photography, black-and-white photography) deals with various aspects of the utopian nature of the medium. In reference to the Parthenon, Le Corbusier writes:

> The Greeks on the Acropolis set up temples which are animated by a single thought, drawing around them the desolate landscape and gathering it into the composition. Thus, on every point of the horizon, the thought is single. It is on this account that there are no other architectural works on this scale of grandeur. We shall be able to talk "Doric" when man, in nobility of aim and *complete sacrifice of all that is accidental in Art*, has reached the higher levels of the mind: austerity (emphasis mine).**4**

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2   Treating the "concept" as an active subject is characteristic of the way metaphysical philosophy sees humankind. Postmodern thinking since World War II (and here Michel Foucault must be mentioned) rejected the metaphysical subject and introduced the subject as a systemic product. In the discourse on photography, the "systemic" subject acquires humanoid characteristics, mostly of the negative kind, photography being characterized as inclined to monologue, ideology, falsification and manipulation. In contrast, I would like to stress the positive attributes of photography, first and foremost amongst them its commitment to showing and to the visible, as well as its non-conceptual properties – particularly the material features of the photographic object, which I believe to be present in the photograph and to have resisting power.

3   Sharon Rotbard, epilogue to the Hebrew edition of Le Corbusier, `Towards a New Architecture` (Tel Aviv: Babel, 1998), 263-264 (Hebrew).

4   Le Corbusier, `Towards a New Architecture`, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), 204.

And of the Propylea he writes:

> Emotion is born of unity of aim…with the firm intention of achieving all that is most pure, most clarified, most economical. *Every sacrifice, every cleansing* had already been performed. The moment was reached when nothing more might be taken away, when nothing would be left but these closely-knit and violent elements, sounding clear and tragic like brazen trumpets (emphasis mine).[5]

In retrospect, we may truly say that the blast of brazen trumpets (purity of thought, racial purity) could already be heard in the modernist attitude toward reality, shattering whatever stood in the way of absolute utopia. We can now discern parallels in the past and present of architecture and photography. Whilst in the past architecture emphasized construction as an obvious concomitant of architecture, nowadays the gaze is also turned on destruction (i.e. concern about environmental damage).[6] Whilst in the past photography went to great lengths to stress the role played by external (ideological, conceptual, artistic) influences in structuring the photographic image, the implications of such an attitude for the documented reality were not considered.[7] In contrast, Toister emphasizes the deconstruction of the photographic subject (that is to say, the violent treatment of reality) by means of overt digital interventions that erase portions of the photograph. This is the case in the series "Visible Color" (2005), showing prefabricated buildings erected on a military facility for transferring goods between the West Bank and Israel. In some of the photographs, Toister leaves "visual noises" in front of, or beside the building. In others, the building is shown in a "sterile" setting. The diagonal shot, drawing on modern photographic aesthetics, aggrandizes the building. It contrasts with the incomplete state of the picture, recognizable in the "visual noise" in the foreground of the frame (pp. 110-117).

In Toister's praxis the emphasis on the obliteration of a photographic subject reached its culmination in the controversial exhibition "The Keepers of Light," which represented the essence of his work till that time. An ordinary photograph of the type that depicts an external reality was printed on the invitation to the exhibition, and thus one expected to see such photographs in the exhibition itself. That expectation was dashed when one encountered photographic prints that depict nothing and were entirely computer- and printer-generated (without resort to a camera or a scanner). They stressed the disconnect between photography and reality and the independent status of the medium. It was effective. I was naturally surprised, and then I was captivated by the magic of the exhibition space. It was a pleasant space, clean and rational in look; a space unapologetic for its conceit or spectacularity; infused with the passion of bright, glossy surfaces detached from any source; a breathtaking emptiness, a "desert."

I left the exhibition in a dismal mood. I had seen there intimations of death – a manifestation of the manner in which the conceptual perception of photography does indeed erase the photographic subject. Søren Kierkegaard, in discussing the aesthetic lifecycle, characterizes artists as being alienated from social realities, which they use as the raw material for their artistic production. In describing the relationship between the artist and reality Kierkegaard frequently uses harsh language. The artist is described as one who pronounces a death sentence on reality,[8] as a poor wretch who feels alienated in life[9] and as an individual who does not faithfully represent the state of affairs in the world.[10] Aesthetic alienation from social realities may be manifested in a variety of ways. However, in this context there is no difference in principle between abstraction and realism (a distinction carefully maintained in discussions of modern art). In both Jeff Wall's realistic photographs, those meticulously staged "real-life" scenes that he defines as "quasi-documentary,"[11] and in Toister's abstract works,

reality is erased and then recreated. The differentiation of the real from the abstract, seen respectively either as a paradigm of the artistic preoccupation with realities external to the medium or with aspects intrinsic to it, is not valid with regard to photography. It is imposed on it by the discourse of traditional arts, namely painting and sculpture. It is only in the terminology of this discourse that we can refer to photography as a non-material medium, a position that continues to be expressed by quite a few painters and sculptors to this day. The prime material of photography is the social and physical reality of the photographic subject, which the photograph makes present (not necessarily representationally). Art photographers overcame the "obstacle" that the discourse of art had placed in their path by insisting that their physical materials were equivalent to the materials of the other arts. In this context one may cite the example of Simcha Shirman's hand-printed black-and-white photographs as similar in principle to Yanai Toister's non-representational prints, despite having emerged from completely different views of photography. The same may also be said of postmodern spectacular photography. They all stress the quality of printing and the manner of display (e.g. type of frame, affixation to perspex, etc.) as proper elements of the medium. Toister's practice is unique in that it unflinchingly balances violence and spectacularity; his works are fierce and aesthetically impressive at the same time. In this sense, his work is non-judgmental, aiming only to show and expose. In its wake, it is difficult not to recall Walter Benjamin's words on the aestheticization of politics (and the violence it engenders) which characterized the fascist regimes of his time – and which, in contrast to Toister's work, disguised itself and its implications for reality.

Another way of filling the frame with material content is to make visible external elements (other than the photographic subject) and to treat them as integral to the photograph. To my mind, the works that Toister

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5   *Ibid.*, 206.

6   In this context, it is worth recalling attitudes to the Land of Israel that characterized it as a barren land awaiting modern Zionist construction, as seen in landscape photographs from the 1920s and 1930s, that depict stark vistas awaiting the mason's trowel or a Zionist takeover of so-called "empty" Arab villages and buildings. For a detailed exposition see Naama Haikin, ed., `Spatial Borders and Local Borders: A Photographic Discourse on Israeli Landscapes`, exh. cat. (Tel-Hai: The Open Museum of Photography, 2006). In his book `The Israeli Project` Zvi Efrat writes, under the entry "Block": "Drawing the blueprint for assembling building blocks seems to be a rather simple job. For this is usually a beginning, a sheet of paper not marked by traces of existing construction, that is to be sparsely sprinkled with identical or similar rectangular stains, according to more or less given rules….There is no 'spirit of the place,' no landscape, no topography (except as an obstacle to be solved in the cross-section), there is no time. There is only a raw composition." Zvi Efrat, "Block," `The Israeli Project: Building and Architecture, 1948–1973`, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2001), 172 (Hebrew). In the context of the convergence of the concept (the Land of Israel as an idea) with the place (the Land of Israel as an actuality), Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran write: "The Old Testament, which bound the pioneer to the place and turned the latter into his property, also removed people from the place by imposing an idea on it, turning the land into a page of the land". Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran, "About the Place (Israeli Anthropology)," `Alpayim` 4 (1991): 23 (Hebrew). In both cases, the concept is contrasted with the concrete reality of life and relationships of erasure are argued.

7   Here one must mention Martha Rosler and Abigail Solomon-Godeau's discussions of the ways in which the attitude of the art world towards photography has led to repression of its inherent social content. See, for example, Martha Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers," in `Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001` (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 9-52; and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Winning the Game When the Rules Have Been Changed: Art Photography and Postmodernism," in `The Photography Reader`, ed. Liz Wells (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 152-163.

8   Søren Kierkegaard, `Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology`, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 40.

9   Søren Kierkegaard, `Either/Or`, part I, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 23.

6-8   <u>BYCO</u>, 2010, c-print on PVC vinyl, 300x2000, installation views
      at the Biennale of Landscape Urbanism, Bat Yam, Israel
      <u>BYCO</u>, 2010, הדפס צבע על יריעת PVC, 300x2000, מראות הצבה
      בביאנלה לאדריכלות הנוף העירוני, בת-ים

exhibited at Dvir Gallery are in fact photographs, not merely because they are executed on photographic paper, but mainly because – by their gesture of erasure and the disclosure of the material practices involved in producing a photographic image – they manifest a theoretical discourse of photography. Although Toister's works are usually considered to be "imageless," non-depictive photography, or "photography that doesn't show"[12] (an expression that he himself often uses in his writings as critic or curator), in my opinion the main body of his work is indeed denotative: it depicts the breadth of the conceptual discourse contained within the photograph, the physical realities from which the image was constructed, the politics of representation and the violence it is part of. Toister's work is utterly photographic because photography is fundamentally a medium that depicts (rather than conceals) social reality – which includes ideology, manipulation and self-interest – and concrete physical reality (both of the photographic subject and of technology). In my understanding, photography's potential for criticism lies in its ability to reveal and expose, and thereby undermine and stimulate action. To show (and not to conceal) – that is the role of photography in the real world (figs. 6-8).

Of the many examples to be found in the discourse that erases the photographic subject, I shall focus here on Vilém Flusser, a theoretician whose writings have influenced Toister's work. In his book Towards a Philosophy of Photography he describes photography as a conceptual medium. It is seen as an autonomous apparatus that executes its functions[13] through the photographer, who operates within a sphere of "programmed freedom" governed by the camera's technical features.[14] As an apparatus, it has a vested interest in realizing its own potential in order to receive real-time positive feedback, which will be reinvested in further development.[15] Flusser clarifies the rift that has opened up between photography as an apparatus and man's social needs in the postmodern era:

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10 *Ibid.*, 30.
11 Ellie Armon Azoulay, "Step into the Light," `Haaretz`, Jan. 10, 2011.
12 See Ory Dessau, "Smoke in Your Eyes," `Studio` 170 (photography issue) (August-September 2007): 25 (Hebrew).
13 Vilém Flusser, `Towards a Philosophy of Photography`, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 73.
14 *Ibid.*, 35.
15 *Ibid.*, 46-47.

The intention behind apparatuses is to liberate the human being from work; apparatuses take over human labor – for example, the camera liberates the human being from the necessity of using a paintbrush. Instead of having to work, the human being is able to play. But apparatuses have come under the control of a number of individual human beings (e.g. capitalists), who have reversed this original intention. Now apparatuses serve the interests of these people; consequently what needs to be done is to unmask the interests behind the apparatuses. According to such an analysis, apparatuses are nothing but peculiar machines, the invention of which has nothing revolutionary about it.[16]

Flusser stresses the independence of the apparatus, describing it as a "black box"[17] that operates automatically, performing simplistic simulations of human thought processes. He would like to dispossess it of such power and make it again subservient to human needs.[18] In Flusser's analysis, art photographers, who broaden the scope of the apparatus through innovative usage of its functions, exemplify a determination to uphold the independence of the subject in a world composed of apparatuses. In this analysis, "informative images" are strictly those photographs which expand the vocabulary of the apparatus with new information by utilizing the apparatus in a novel way or "playing against the camera."[19] Conversely, photographs that merely depict reality are superfluous or redundant, since they do not offer new information but rather exploit the automation of the apparatus in order to repeatedly recycle images. Flusser writes:

It is true that one can, in theory, take a photograph over and over again in the same or a very similar way, but this is not important for the process of taking photographs. Such images are "redundant": They carry no new information and are superfluous. In the following, no account will be taken of redundant photographs since the phrase "taking photographs" will be limited to the production of informative images. As a result, it is true, the taking of snapshots will largely fall outside the scope of this analysis.[20]

Flusser disparages the concrete contents of the photograph; as long as it is taken in the conventional way, in deference to the demands of the apparatus, the photographic subject is of no consequence in his eyes. He asserts:

The documentary photographer, just like the person taking snaps, is interested in continually shooting new scenes from the same old perspective. The photographer in the sense intended here is, on the other hand, interested (like the chess-player) in seeing in continually new ways, i.e. producing new, informative states of things…. Both those taking snaps and documentary photographers, however, have not understood "information." What they produce are camera memories, not information, and the better they do it, the more they prove the victory of the camera over the human being.[21]

However, in and of itself, the photographic apparatus does try to document reality. This is what it is programmed for: creating an infinite number of images of reality, differing only in their content, but identical in the way they are staged. Discussing photography from the viewpoint of the concept leads to ignoring the particular reality portrayed by the photograph. Whether or not one accepts Flusser's claim that photography is a conceptual medium, the stance ascribing importance to aspects of the photographic act other than the actual photographic subject facing the camera leads in effect to effacement of the photographic subject. Flusser's point of departure is that photography is hostile to humanity because of improper exploitation of the photographic apparatus and therefore it must be sabotaged or exposed as foolish (and, by analogy,

deceitful). As I have said, my own outlook is different: I consider photography to be an important and worthy mechanism, mainly because of its ability to establish an additional physical and conceptual presence (namely, that of the photographic subject) within a given material-social-conceptual reality. It is this fundamental attribute of photography that I would like to reassert and emphasize. The "informative photography" suggested by Flusser is in essence formalistic photography employing improbable configurations in order to avoid the conventional and the automatic.[22] Occasionally, this can bring a fundamental property of photography into focus and sharpen our perception and interpretation of the image, but it is often a formalistic diversion that conceals more than it informs. My definition of informative photography is photography that presents with complete transparency every facet of the visible, including the photographic subject.

I am not aware of any photographer who has expressed this so clearly as Yanai Toister. His eloquently stated position exposes the physical reality along with the practices applied to it, in order to establish photography as a virtual space. In fact, the very existence of these practices of erasure confirms the presence of a photographic subject, for that which does not exist, does not need to be erased. Toister regards photography as a neutral apparatus and does not interfere with the camera. He therefore exhibits both the operation of erasing the photographic subject, carried out after the photographic act, and its inherent violence which stems, in part, from applying his conceptual view of photography. It is most noticeable in the "Palettes" series (2006, pp. 68-75, 104-107), which consists of digitally processed photographs of a rural settlement. These works openly state that they have undergone an act of effacement, completely "cleansing" the landscape of any extraneous "noise" likely to conceal the houses and impair their integrity or the analogous integrity of the photograph. In these works Toister introduces a discussion of color as a model by exhibiting

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16   *Ibid.*, 72.
17   *Ibid.*, 16, 27.
18   *Ibid.*, 74-75.
19   *Ibid.*, 80.
20   *Ibid.*, 26.
21   *Ibid.*, 59.
22   *Ibid.*, 76.

a "color photograph" and a "black-and-white photograph" of the same image on a common support, doing so in such a way that it is difficult for the viewer to decide whether color has been removed from the image, or added to it. Although it is well known that black-and-white photography historically preceded color, and revisiting its origins is consistent with the initial phase of establishing a settlement that is ostensibly depicted in the photograph, the digital appearance and the fashionable look of these works undermine the historicity of the photograph and award primacy to color. Presenting identically designed houses as a model intensifies the anonymity of the photograph: we have before us a "nowhere" that is also "everywhere." Despite the realistic portrayal, the photographs are almost completely abstract. Although Toister usually takes his photographs in places of historical or political significance – such as the pictorial photographs taken at the beginning of his career at sites mentioned in the Bible, or images of settlements in the Occupied Territories – this is not indicated. The absence of information about places that are so fraught with meaning enhances the abstraction.

It is interesting to juxtapose this with a different series, "Sum of Forms," photographed in Bat Yam. In that particular series (exhibited at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2008) the architectural vision comes up against a specific material reality. The buildings, which were built in the spirit of Le Corbusier's vision, had not met their occupants' needs, and so extensions in the form of incongruous white cubes were built on; diminutive, pale imitations of the Corbusian dream, whose presence accentuates its collapse in the face of Israeli reality. In these photographs, the actual white cube is juxtaposed against a utopian rectangle of light, whose appearance on the face of the building turns it into a mockery (pp. 56-59). This is irony at its best. In another photograph, we are shown a well-known structure designed by the architect Zvi Hecker in Jerusalem's Ramot Polin neighborhood. It is based on the

form of the dodecahedron (an equilateral polyhedron with twelve faces, each of which is an equilateral pentagon). Here again, the occupants enlarged their dwellings with cuboid extensions that are presumably more comfortable to live in (p. 103). A different group of photographs, taken in Los Angeles in 2004, shows the red carpets used as the VIP walkway towards Hollywood's Oscar ceremony as they are put out to dry after the ceremony. The colors seen in the photograph are the three primary colors of light – red, blue and green – which together produce white, or a "blank sheet," in line with Toister's pursuit of models. Both the color model and the model of glamour manifested in Hollywood fantasies are seen through the prism of the tangible reality, which makes their existence possible yet is mostly invisible. This is the back side of fantasy: a red felt carpet being rolled out along a sheet of blue plastic by a stooped Mexican laborer, with green weeds in the background (pp. 2-5). In another series, taken in 2005 in an ecological resort on one of the Fijian islands, workmen pushing oil barrels out of the sea are portrayed with a marked romantic aesthetic (pp. 176-179). In these excellent series, Toister presents the clash between a rationale and a concrete reality of life that it encounters, just as photography realizes its potential in the encounter with material reality – a reality which is often critical of the concept that gives it form.

Susan Buck-Morss insists on the materiality of the image of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, pointing out that it is an image taken from a specific human reality:

> "Photography is a theological technology," Peter Osborne tells us, because it is indexical, a trace marking the intelligibility of the material world. This trace is the surplus that escapes even multiple meanings of the intentional message sent, in this case, by the terrorists. It is "theological" precisely not in the fundamentalist sense. The latter appeals to the text, whether Bible or Qur'an, to interpret the world as fateful intention. To

do so is to exclude photography's material trace, the meaning of which surpasses the predetermination of the word. The traumatic intensity of the images of destruction existed precisely here: as cinematic as they appeared, they were unintentionally actual, irrefutably material and real. And the reality muddied the symbolic message.[23]

As a trace of reality, photography is also at the very least (if not first and foremost) a deviation from the concept that formulated it, resistance to it. In her next paragraph, in direct response to Jean Baudrillard, Buck-Morss uses a photographic strategy by confronting a symbolic act with a reality that opposes it:

> If we were to read the act symbolically as an attack on global capital, then how do we square this with the fact that it was the secretaries, janitors, food servers, clerical workers, security guards, and firemen who were killed? If it was an attack on "America," then why were there so many other citizen nationals and so many different ethnic names among the victims? If this was the hub of the global economy, then why was it small-business people and laid-off workers who suffered? If New York was symbolic of Western cultural decadence and sexual libertinism, then why were so many ordinary friends, families and children left behind? To see a photograph as purely symbolic, rather than as a trace of the real, is a reductive visual practice – shall we call it visual fundamentalism?[24]

Thus Buck-Morss undermines the terrorist act by means of a photographic practice: a sharply focused and detailed ("realistic") observation of the social reality that it encountered.[25]

The materiality in Toister's exhibition "The Keepers of Light" was mainly conceptual – a materiality that was contrasted with the materiality of the photographic subject. Although "materiality" does describe the two

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23   Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror, Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (London & New York: Verso, 2003), 25-26. In this context, it is worth reflecting on Thomas Ruff's work *Jpeg ny14* (2007), a photograph of the collapse of the Twin Towers that he downloaded from the Internet and enlarged to the point of the image breaking up into pixels. The work is powerful because despite the decomposition of the image, it preserves the presence of the event (in contrast to other works, in which the memory of the event is lost and which therefore degenerate into sterile formalism).

24   *Ibid.*, 26.

25   It is interesting to recall Ohad Zehavi's discussion of the same terrorist event. He points out that the American media and American society preferred to focus on long-shots of the buildings rather than photographs that showed the people trapped inside or those falling/jumping to their death. See Ohad Zehavi, "Nine Eleven: A Death Unreal, Impalpable and Inhuman," *History and Theory* 18 (October 2010), http://bezalel.secured.co.il/zope/home/en/1286358025/1286483382.

26   I would like to thank Dr Dror Pimentel, whose book *The Dream of Purity: Heidiger with Derrida* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2009) (Hebrew) and our conversations about Derrida, in particular with reference to Toister's practice, helped me to interpret the latter's work. Contamination as an ethic, and the violence it involves, in contrast to metaphysical violence; evoking and complicating dichotomies; playfulness and the production of fissures in thought as the role of philosophy; and precision of expression as equivalent to the aesthetic value of the utterance – these are all lines of thought that informed this text from the start.

instances, the word has a different sense in each context, each negating and contaminating the other. Printing the black frame of the film's margins in the series "Register of Facts" has a similar function. On the one hand, it underlines the autonomy of the photograph as an image. On the other hand, its inclusion is characteristic of photojournalism and shots of the "decisive moment," where the uncropped print indicates the photographer's skill and the credibility of the document. Against this background, the absence of movement and the vagueness of the series is particularly noticeable, as for instance in a photograph showing a scene of stolid, unremarkable vegetation (p. 41). As an image, the power of the photograph comes from a transparent-white blur, which encroaches on the lower-left corner and creates compositional balance. It resulted from a mishap in which uncontrolled light was allowed to fall on the film at the back of the camera. It is in this way, by means of a fault that originated in a mechanical hitch, that Toister makes his assertion about the completeness of the image being the product of a medium that is disconnected from reality and has autonomous existence in its own right.

The gesture of erasure that Toister has been undertaking throughout his artistic career, which culminated in the exhibition "The Keepers of Light," is akin to a gesture of contamination of the model that he himself has advocated as a valid alternative – a model of photography divorced from the material reality external to it. In this sense, it is consistent with his entire artistic endeavor, for contamination of the model and striking at its integrity have been hallmarks of his work from the outset. Thus a photograph from the series "Straits" (2002, p. 109) in which a dark shadow floats above the Jezreel Valley both breaks up the integrity of the "landscape photography" model and disrupts the vision of the Jezreel Valley as a model of the Zionist enterprise. Another photograph shows beehives (p. 102) whose random placement in an open space is quite at odds with the spatial arrangement

of a row of houses, whose architectural-formal logic their modernistic cuboid shape imitates. Moreover, their yellow color is not one of the primary colors of light but a mixture of colors, that is, a "contamination" of perfect, pure color. This type of apparent "carelessness" is expressed digitally in photographs from the 2006 series "Palettes." They show yellow houses built on a Jewish settlement extension located in the hills south of Hebron. As opposed to architectural photography, which generally employs a large camera mounted on a tripod, the photographs in this series were taken with a compact digital camera. And whilst architectural photography meticulously aligns the perspective so as to portray the building in straight lines, this fast automatic photography distorts its lines. This latter runs contrary to the photographic perspective created by the general ground plan of the site, which gives the photographs the modern look of a landscape scene (pp. 68-75, 104-107). In the series "Visible Color", the prefabricated buildings painted in composite colors such as purple, pink and orange were also photographed with a camera unsuited to architectural photography. Furthermore, optical "background noises" make it difficult to appreciate the building as a whole and stand in contrast to the aggrandizing camera angle (pp. 110-117). Contamination of the model is partly achieved by exposing the practices that establish it. This is what happens in the 2005 series "Tri-Channeled Compositions." The image of the straight photograph – representing Nature (trees) or Culture (bridges, building materials, roads, electricity pylons) – is broken up into the operations that create within it an illusion of "natural" colorfulness and an impression of depth (that is, perspective and three-dimensionality). Thus an alternative aesthetic is produced, a sort of contemporary formulation of Mark Rothko's fields of colors (pp. 78, 81, 83, 85). Bringing Yaacov Agam's work into Dvir Gallery could also be considered an act that contaminates the "White City" of Tel Aviv and the "white cube" of the Israeli art scene, which has mostly rejected Agam's work,

9   Untitled, 2000, from the series "Ahab," c-print, 65x80

ללא כותרת, 2000, מתוך הסדרה "אחאב", תצלום צבע, 65x80

characterized as it is by a profusion of color, optical illusion and kinetic aspects. Toister's work – in the overall sense and in its details too – amazingly suited the "white cube" of the gallery space, but it was a suitability informed by contamination. By means of divided unity or fabricated contrasts, the exhibition presented contamination as a point of departure, which is a gesture of hospitality.[26] It is a gesture of violent erasure that casts doubt even on itself. Undermining the simple and the pure in all its modes, it combines infinite playfulness and profound thinking.

In a new series of works that Toister has prepared for the exhibition at the Open Museum of Photography he returns to elements that characterized the straight photography of his early days. The photographic subject in these straight photographs – in addition to the actual photographed space (indistinct though it may be) – is photography itself (fig. 9). We can discern in them another central theme that recurs throughout Toister's work: a discussion of photography as a systematic scheme for arranging reality (to the point of replacing it). In the new photographs (pp. 118-121) reality itself assumes the form of a photograph. Subjects at the heart of Toister's work – the discourse on photography, the debate about nullification of the photographic subject – are expressed in reverse fashion in these photographs, in which reality seems to confirm the existence of photography. Toister has used a sophisticated scanner designed for scanning three-dimensional objects in order to scan some red Fuji apples that he brought from Australia. Traces of leaves that had covered the apples show up as yellow marks on their surface. Toister has returned to the pioneering days of photography, to the photogram, which he has found in the actual world. The scanned image (that, like the photogram, is photography without a camera) creates a three-dimensional illusion similar to studio-made still-life photographs, and stands in contrast with the traditional photogram's flatness. Photography returns to its role as an observer of reality, finds traces of itself within it and gathers them into its fold, only to turn the tables once again.

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