"The Only Honest Act is a Search for Form" / Yuval Yasky

In our first encounter in Yanai Toister's studio at the Artists' Studios in Tel Aviv, we spoke of our common biographical interface. Both of us acquired a substantial part of our academic and professional training in southern California, and so there is a correspondence between Toister's visual and thematic sensibility, as it is manifested in his "architectural" photographic series, and the subjects I often address in my academic practice – the Israeli suburb as generic model, indiscriminately strewn all over the land, sprawling out in every direction and delineating the territory as Israeli. Our conversation summoned up contexts that we are both acquainted with: Lewis Baltz and the "New Topographics," Ed Ruscha, and other examples of Californian photography of the 1970s. These photographers documented American suburbia, the architectural genre so familiar to anyone who has experienced life in California – the parking lots, the office parks, the big opaque boxes by the side of the roads and all those residues of insatiable consumerism that pervade the western United States and have transformed entire territories into junkspace – which is, according to the architect and theoretician Rem Koolhaas, modernism's most distinctive architectonic product: "If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet. The built… product of modernization is not modern architecture but junkspace."[1]

Toister's architectural photography goes against the grain of Israeli architecture, as well as against Israeli photography, which obsessively engages in the politics of Israeli space. The series "Palettes" (2006, pp. 68-75, 104-107), which was photographed in the Jordan Valley and southern Mount Hebron and depicts the settlement housing of Amana and similar movements, ostensibly refuses to recount the Israeli narrative – the politics of dispossession and appropriation, the Zionist narrative of

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1 Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," **October** 100 (Spring 2002): 175.

conquering the land. The subject of the photographs is not geopolitics but rather the zero point of architecture: those remnants of modernist rationalism, the model that replicates itself time and time again in the Israeli Levittown,[2] as well as in the manipulations Toister performs on the photographs, from which he removes any indication of location, leaving the buildings like relics in the heart of the desolate wilderness. The buildings were usually photographed right after the completion of construction and before they were inhabited, the point in time when architecture is traditionally photographed. It is the moment in which, at least in the perception of architects, a building is in its optimal state – pristine and new, without any marks of wear and tear inflicted on it by its users. Another series of architectural photography that belongs to this vector in Toister's practice and even intensifies his undermining of the mainstream currents of the two disciplines – photography and architecture – is the series "Visible Color" (2005), portraying buildings at the Jalame military base, a big checkpoint in the Jenin sector of the Occupied Territories (fig. 1). The subject of the photographs is supposedly rooted in an extreme point of Israeli political photography, while the camera angles are taken from the lexicon of heroic modernist photography used by photographers such as Ezra Stoller.[3] Yet the photographs are devoid of any political reference and the architectural object is quite different, to the point of absurdity, from the heroic modernist images (pp. 110-117).

The critical stance of both series is twofold and exposes the deficiencies of the protocols commonly practiced in both photography and architecture. Obviously, the choice of the locations in which the series were shot is not coincidental. We know that the photographed residential buildings are located in the Occupied Territories and that the prefabricated painted homes are part of a large military complex. But all this is said offhandedly, and the photographs present themselves as politically neutral. The objects are centered, their surroundings are completely generic and unidentified, there is no sign of fences or any other hint that would testify to the politics that produced places such as those photographed. The discussion is medium-oriented, and the frames of reference of the photographs, recognizable from the recent history of photography, are meant as an internal criticism on Israeli photography which has immersed itself in political criticism and patently utilizes the camera as a means of documenting and representing reality and its injustices, while abandoning the discourse concerning the potential and limitations of the medium in an era of proliferating digital photography and image-processing software. In contrast to documentary photography, Toister's products are infused with digital manipulations: color adjustments and corrections, image cleaning, background changes or neutralization – all is possible and legitimate in order to produce the final printed image.

As already mentioned, Toister's criticism is also directed towards the conventions of architecture, particularly in his selection of objects that are considered "unworthy" of architectural photography. Both series oppose the architectural fixation with forms or types of buildings worthy of documentation and discussion, versus those deemed unworthy. The suburban house, and even more so the precast concrete military buildings – particularly when garishly painted – do not belong to the right architectural caste. However, structures like those photographed pervade the Israeli space, and contrary to the prevalent view – held mostly by architects – of architecture as a benevolent act that is part of "high" culture ("architecture, the mother of all arts"), they are the object of desire for most Israelis, and I dare say, for most people everywhere. The use of familiar, heroic and monumental photographic language generates a strong dissonance with the photographed subjects and challenges the common perception that dismisses the industrialized and appallingly banal concrete buildings as completely extraneous to the world of architecture.

Installing the framed photographs in a single row inside the white space of the gallery extricates these buildings from a wretched architectural fate and turns their gaudy, even vulgar color scheme into one that possesses the highest level of aesthetic value.

A similar, albeit reverse course is taken in two additional series of architectural photography. The first series, "KPU" (2008), is concerned with recreating familiar photographs of public buildings in kibbutzim. In it, Toister revisits famous photographs that are the cultural legacy handed down by kibbutz architecture and reconstructs them by shooting from the same, original angles and removing from the frame all the visually intrusive and disruptive add-ons, such as signposts etc. (pp. 16, 34, 62-65). Two of the buildings featured in this exhibition have become icons of modernist public architecture in

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2 Levittown is an American suburb in Long Island, New York. In the history of architecture it is considered the prototypical 1950s American suburb.

3 Ezra Stoller (1915-2004) is renowned for his iconic photographs of the most important architectural works of American modernism, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building.

1 "Visible Color," 2005, c-prints, installation view at Sandroni.Rey Gallery, Los Angeles, 2006
"צבע נראה", 2005, תצלומי צבע, מראה הצבה בגלריה סנדרוני.ריי, לוס אנג׳לס, 2006

Israel, their understated grandeur befitting a kibbutz. The first is the cultural center at Kibbutz Heftziba designed by architect Ziva Armoni (p. 34) and the second is the communal dining room of Kibbutz Givat Brenner designed by architect Robert Bannet (fig. 2). Both buildings, well known to any Israeli architect, are shown in their present state – the splendid culture house at the foot of Mount Gilboa stands abandoned like a modern ruin, while the windows of the monumental dining room are partly dismantled, neglect glaring from every corner. The photographs are free of nostalgia and raise the question of the short lifespan of an architectural object, however exquisite it may be, in comparison to its existence in memory, which is fed predominantly by flattering photographic images.

"The only honest act is a search for form, not for narrative," Toister declares.[4] At the exhibition in the Israeli Pavilion of the 11th Architecture Biennale in Venice, Toister exhibited photographs of several architectural projects from the period celebrated by many as the golden era of Israeli architecture, especially since the exhibition "The Israeli Project" curated in 2000 by Architect Zvi Efrat at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion in Tel Aviv. The photographs feature public housing, most of it utterly banal and generic, the like of which is scattered in thousands throughout Israel (pp. 56-59). The views seen in the photographs are among of the most typical and identifiable elements of the Israeli residential landscape: built-on additions, balconies closed off by plastic louvers, and air conditioners protruding from the façades of buildings.

One project featured in this series is particularly outrageous – the most avant-garde residential project that was ever built in Israel, located in Jerusalem's Ramot Polin neighborhood, known as the "Beehives" on account of its complex geometry (p. 103). At the time of its construction, the building, designed by Israeli architect Zvi Hecker, became famous all over the world for being one of the most daring experiments in the field of industrialized residential construction. Forty years have passed, and the photographs reveal an architectural grotesque. The original building, composed of pentagonal elements, seems to have been swallowed up and digested by built-on additions, gaping balconies and apartment expansions. The avant-garde housing has gradually been transformed, beyond recognition, into standard Israeli public housing units: the pentagons have slowly turned into rectangles, the modern precast sections faced with sawn stone were covered over by a cloak of chiseled Jerusalem stone. In a process of architectural metabolism, Hecker's late modernist radicalism has given way to Jerusalem's banality, which cares little for fine architecture. Anyone familiar with the original project finds it difficult to believe that the photograph is not an elaborate photomontage. The photographer's choice to focus on form turns the spectacle into an experience of conflict between opposing geometries. At the same time, his choice not to present a social narrative (the oppression of experimental architecture and its inherent lack of consideration for the user), or the economic and political narrative (the welfare state versus neo-liberalism) merely underscores questions concerning the immense gap between high architectural culture and everyday life. The former, as manifested in exhibitions, publications and academic discussions, heralds avant-garde objects as icons. The latter puts architecture to daily use without paying heed to the dictates of high culture. The criticism embodied in this project is particularly relevant at a time when the discourse about architectural preservation has become dominant in the western world, raising questions such as who has the authority to decide what is worthy of preservation and what is not, or in which cases existing buildings may be changed, expanded, or demolished.

If we embrace Toister's explicit outlook and search for form or geometry, we will discover that banal, familiar forms that do not stimulate the architectural imagination best tolerate change and development, and are therefore

2 GB, 2008, from the series "KPU," archival pigment print on cotton rag paper, 90x129
GB, 2008, מתוך הסדרה "KPU", הדפס פיגמנט ארכיבי על נייר כותנה, 90x129

more suitable and desirable to users than the geometric experiments that impose themselves like a straightjacket. In his book How Buildings Learn, Stewart Brand, one of the pioneers of the environmental movement in the United States, maintained that a supply of cheap and simple houses, capable of constant change at the lowest cost possible, is a prerequisite for the development of innovation and social sustainability.[5] The book was widely criticized and derided by architects, who viewed it as a heretical rejection of the value of architectural innovation, propelled forward by formal and geometric manipulations. Toister's photographic series, which touches upon the issue of architectural form and its ability to transform itself, support Brand's claims to a large degree.

The two final works I would like to address are distinguished from the others primarily because both were created without a camera. The first, 9-Sheet Experiment (2006-9), features nine black-and-white photo-sensitive papers that depict no image, each exposed to light to a different degree and framed on a background of brown

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4 Yanai Toister, quoted (in a slightly different translation) in Michal Cederbaum and Nitzan Kalush Chechik, eds. "Yanai Toister: Sum of Forms," **Additions: Architecture Along a Continuum**, exh. cat., the Israeli Pavilion, 11th International Architecture Biennale, Venice (Tel Aviv: Israeli Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008), 25.

5 Stewart Brand, **How Buildings Learn: What Happens after They're Built** (New York: Viking Press, 1994).

paper (pp. 15, 46-49, 166). Made in California, it was created as a result of a malfunction in the dark room in which Toister was printing his photographs. The second, The Keepers of Light (2010), exhibited at Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv, comprises a series of banners in graded colors, which were digitally printed on photographic paper (pp. 93-99, 168). This work stemmed from an examination of the façade of the Dan Hotel overlooking the Tel Aviv promenade, created by the artist Yaacov Agam. The issue of a photograph without a camera and without a photographed object is fascinating in itself, yet that is not the subject I wish to explore here. Rather, I would like to focus on the architectural insights that I formed while looking at these two works. I consider them as architectural photography, a statement which is not at all obvious. The term architectural photography usually refers to photography of architectural objects or interiors, yet in this instance, the actual objects are absent and we cannot see them.

I would like to suggest that we approach these works through a notion that is at the heart of one of the key discourses in the field of architecture – the notion of mapping. As an architect accustomed to dealing with the spatial, material and volumetric attributes of objects in the world, it took a while for me to formulate the understanding that both works are in fact maps, as defined by theoreticians and writers in the field of architecture and landscape architecture. James Corner distinguishes between two concepts to explain the power and function of mapping as an act of producing meaning: *tracing*, which he defines as the reproduction of reality with technical means and conventional modes of representation, and *mapping*, defined as a significance-generating act: "As a creative practice, mapping precipitates its most productive effects through a finding that is also a founding; its agency lies in neither reproduction nor imposition but rather in uncovering realities previously unseen or unimagined, even across seemingly exhausted grounds."[6]

Reading 9-Sheet Experiment as the product of an act of mapping is better understood when the story of its making is known. It all started when Toister, while printing in his California darkroom, realized that light was seeping into the dark room. In order to discover the source of light infiltration, he left photo-sensitive papers in several places around the room for a few hours, and on his return, was able to map the lighting in the room according to the papers' degree of exposure (manifested in different shades of gray). The series exhibited on the gallery wall is therefore a mapping of the darkroom lighting. Obviously, this linear installation does not divulge anything about what the room looks like, yet by isolating the parameter of lighting the photographs provide us with reliable information about its suitability for its intended function.

The work The Keepers of Light is more complex, but it too complies with the definition of mapping, disclosing information on a significant aspect of the architecture of a particular building. The work started out with the artist formulating an algorithm for the color variations of the pillars on the western façade of the Dan Hotel, which he scientifically tweaked with a computer. The operation of mapping the existing color scheme and placing it within the constraints of scientific precision, which is not in fact applicable to the actual building, exposes the way Yaacov Agam composed the façade of the building. At the same time, it allowed Toister to change reality by using computer-generated mathematic manipulations, whose products he exhibited in the gallery space as a modulation of vertical color elements, evoking the building's western façade. Analyzing the façade and recreating it by different means in the gallery space is an act that straddles the two disciplines of photography and architecture. The atypical installation in the gallery formed an architectural space quite different from those usually encountered in exhibitions of photography or other two-dimensional media. Nevertheless, despite the extreme abstraction

and shift away from the world of "classic" photography towards new territories in which the line between the fields of photography and architecture starts to blur, there is a return to themes that were also present in his other series. This is particularly apparent in the selection of the work's subject: the western façade of the Dan Hotel is also known as Agam's Wall, perceived by the local art scene as commercial art that stretches (or even transgresses) the bounds of good taste. Thus Toister's work challenges the distinctions between legitimate ("high") artistic subjects and those that are best left untouched.

It is difficult to define Yanai Toister's work as architectural photography, since its subjects and photographic language do not adhere to the conventions of such photography. His use of changing contexts; his choices challenging prevalent subjects of architecture and stagnant perceptions of architectural culture; his play with low and high, worthy and unworthy; his undermining of the canonical and the critical outlook that underlies his entire body of work – all these make him one of the most interesting and challenging artists working in Israel today. His latest works bring him closer to the architectural realm: he uses various fields of disciplinary knowledge quite freely to create systems of representation that may be defined as cartographic. Thus he depicts a physical space not through direct tracing or representation, but through actions that create a world or bestow new meaning on existing, familiar physical schemes.

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6 James Corner, "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention," in **Mappings**, ed. Denis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 215.