

Museum in a Gallery - Reflections on Yuval Yairi's Exhibition

Text by Dr. Ketzia Alon / April 2011

Three years ago, the curator of photography at the Israel Museum invited the artist Yuval Yairi to photograph the museum's remodeling process from his personal perspective.

This renovation ensured the museum's position as the architectural and cultural jewel in the crown. On July 26, 2010, the renewed Israel Museum was inaugurated in a grand ceremony. Three years of renovation had come to an end with a long list of glamorous events, gala parties and dazzling openings. Magical, glimmering moments concealed the endless hard work put in by a multitude of workers-every day and every hour. Anxious site contractors, industrious workers, shouting, pouring sweat, tight schedules, exhausting heat and freezing cold were all swallowed by the black hole of the passing of time, of history, leaving just the "object itself", the museum, as a silent testimony to their work. The museum's temporary stage as a construction site had made it into a kind of "antimuseum"- a site that had devoured its entire contents into its bowels-basements and warehouses- until the "storm subsided".

In his famous book, *Das Capital* (1867), Karl Marx describes the elusive character of the commodity; the way it slips into our reality, impeccable, perfect, never alluding to the labor that has been put in to it – be it a garment, an auditorium, a car, or a museum.

Similar to the cathedral of a medieval town, which required considerable time and huge financial resources, today's museum represents the symbolic center of the urban cultural sphere, dominating with its magnetic power the consciousness of thousands of artists eager to create art/merchandise that would reach the gates of the destination they yearned for- the museum. In the chapter, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret", Marx writes about the commodity fetish, about the way we attribute symbolic and spiritual meaning to any object that appears as a commodity in a world of commodities. Yairi's exhibition asserts the museum's new stance as a postmodern "super-spot" and "super-object".

No longer does the art works it contains bestow the museum its glory, rather it is the museum itself that functions as the ultimate work of art. A couple prime examples are the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Museum of African Culture in Paris. In light of this current change in our perception of museums, it is possible to understand the lively discourse surrounding the renovation of the Israel Museum; for expanding the museum's building cannot be likened to

closing your porch with bricks. When it comes to a museum, the transparent architecture of the building transforms into a visual spectacle, rich with cultural meaning.

Yuval Yairi chooses a complex location. A site that lies at the intersection of mundane reality and the logic of the commodity on one hand, and, on the other hand, the logic of the art work itself. He documents the enterprise of building a museum, while creating a work of art from the daily routine of the temporary workers (mostly foreign workers) and museum employees. Through the meticulously built compositions, chiaroscuro relations, visual sensitivity and perfect timing, Yairi turns the piles of boxes, paint brushes, scaffoldings, ladders and rolls of masking tape into the raw material of his artistic photography and short video series. These objects are expropriated from their functional status as “useful tools” and are transformed into shapes and colors, into an aesthetic experience. Thus Yairi recreates the museum’s magical ability, as a transformative institution, to turn any ready-made it displays into a respectable work of art.

In his book, “Art Power”, the theorist Boris Groys writes, “In recent decades it increasingly seems that the art world has shifted its interest from works of art to art as documentation and to the documentation of art”¹. And Yairi’s work indeed captures the zeitgeist of the present: it is “art as documentation” and a “documentation of art”. In the work “#1641”, for example, the voluptuous women from Peter Paul Rubens’ “Death of Adonis” appear amidst the large sheets of industrial plastic, emerging out of torn twisted wrapping paper. The representation of full bodied female figures chafing at the reality of the protecting, revealing, yet concealing cover is an ironic comparison to the act of creating the picture itself. Another example of Yairi’s ability to transpose “art as documentation” and “documentation of art” is in the art work titled “Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew” by Jusepe de Ribera. In Yairi’s portrayal of this masterpiece in the Israel Museum, he captures four Museum employees hanging the work in a surprisingly colorful, compositional echo of the artwork itself.

In Yairi’s previous works “Forevermore” (Tel Aviv Museum, 2005), “Palaces of Memory” (2007) and “Savoy” (2010), Yairi created a world composed of endless pieces, through the deployment of countless photographs, he deconstructed and rebuilt spaces. In each of his works Yairi scanned the space, slowly and meticulously, building the photographic scope out of thousands of tiny photos. His current work also continues the thematic thread of exploring architectural spaces heavily charged with brimming memories- the leper house in Jerusalem in “Forevermore”, The Savoy Hotel in the “Savoy” series or S.Y Agnon’s house in “Palaces of Memory”. Yairi’s current

¹ Ilan Gur Zeev, pp. 63, 64

destination is the museum, being the father of all memory palaces, an encapsulation of cultures and the temple of the muses.

In his book, "The Frankfurt School and the History of Pessimism", Ilan Gur Zeev refers to the aesthetic doctrine of the German philosopher Herbert Marcuse, writing that Marcuse believed that only art is capable of reaching "behind the scenes" of the facts.² Through a radical diversion of perspective and re-formalization, Yairi turns the "work" into "art", the "behind the scenes" to "center stage". The museum itself is relegated to the background and the heroes of the documented event are not the Prime Minister or Museum Directors, but rather the Chinese day workers, the foreigners awaiting their expulsion on any given day.

In his "Chronovation" series, Yairi meticulously builds a compositional grid made of 160 different squares; squares that capture the flicker of movement, a still moment in time. Through the use of a rigid structure of edited and disciplined lines, Yairi re-shuffles the hierarchies of taste categorized by "high" and "low", mixing different aesthetic approaches, as if trying to reduce and disperse the symbolic power encompassed in these little squares.

It would seem that the intolerable gap between the minimal wages the workers earn and the gigantic financial and symbolic value the actual building gains, is in the extreme when referring to a museum, an edifice which contains objects (the art works) claiming a financial value much greater than the lives of those building it.³

The foreign workers building the "nations temples" are a well-known global phenomenon, which takes place in Israel as well. The artist, seeing these workers as subjects under observation, is placed in a complex ethical dilemma. Yairi chooses to step out of the distant, removed position, hiding behind the camera, and to "step in", towards personal interaction with the workers. He succeeds in shattering the transparent wall which permanently separates the foreign workers from their employer, and creates a personal relationship with some of them. This new level of intimacy is well expressed in the photos that do not bear even a hint of patronage, and succeed in capturing rare moments of privacy and intimacy.

Yairi creates moments of duplication while investigating movement in space, an attempt to demonstrate the tempo of work taking place simultaneously in dozens of different areas during

² Boris Groys, p. 86

³ Lately, this tension exploded when it was discovered that the foreign workers who built the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim suffered appalling conditions and their back wages were withheld. Several artists signed a petition calling to boycott the museum and due to social pressure, the contractors agreed to change their despicable employment policies.

the renovation of the museum. The panoramic-like view, strong colors and the topological references in Yairi's works are in dialogue both with Muybridge's early works and with the photographs of contemporary German photographer Andreas Gursky. Yairi's focus is not only on "means of representation of movement in time" or "the tempo of modern life", but also captures his interest in the human spirit and in bestowing pure beauty to each and every moment of life itself. This exhibition creates an entirety which wraps itself around the viewer and conforms itself to a split second of a previous occurrence.

Yairi's videos are made up of single seconds of movement. These are "moving images" resting on the border between stills and video, pixilation that captures a body gesture, a motional element, a single connected composition. "The photos were taken as a response to a certain motion in space. The way I shot the photos resembles, in a way, the act of surveillance cameras that are situated and focused on one point. At times, I react like a motion detector and take the photo when there is an unusual movement in the space, but not automatically. I decide when the motion justifies a photo that can provide interesting information about the photographed action", says Yairi.

The recurrent motif in all the works is the investigation of motion. Yairi presents different types of viewing and representations of movement in time- a horizontal spreadsheet of motion that creates a sort of graph of movement (Chronovation) as opposed to the video works- which scatter the motional segments on a defined time-line. Thus, for example, in the video entitled "Nimrod", which centers around a statue by Yitzhak Danziger that is one of the most important representations of Israeli art, we see cleaners surrounding the statue, working around it with gestures that call to mind a primeval ritual. The movement of the working men turns into the hands of a human clock, marking the passage of time. This video juxtaposes the idea of the eternity of the art work, embodied here by the stability and symbolic importance of Nimrod, with the temporality and transparency of man. "According to Marcuse, only when it came to the medium of beauty, was mankind allowed to share happiness, yet beauty was captured in the realm of art" writes Gur Zeev. Marcuse demands to unleash beauty from its place of exile- art- to the generality of everyday life.⁴ It would seem that this is exactly what Yairi is striving to achieve. He is attempting a morphological breakthrough, a re-framing of both the act of creating art and the logic which stands at the base of the museum as an institution. I would like to conclude with another quote by Boris Groys: "Classifying art as documentation as if it were a 'regular' art work would be an act of misunderstanding and ignoring the originality of this practice, of its uniqueness, which is its core: art as documentation and not as its representation or its placement.

⁴ Ilan Gur Zeev, p. 80

The common comparison between museums and cemeteries is not coincidental, understanding art as the ultimate outcome of life is actually erasing life. Art as documentation is an attempt to use artistic media inside exhibition spaces in order to refer to life itself.”⁵

Yairi endeavors to change the museum-mausoleum from the “house of death” accommodating dead art works, to the “house of life”, where living people are constantly moving, breathing, laughing, happy or sad, excited or crying, and projecting what they have within themselves on the institution as a whole.

⁵ Boris Groys, p. 65