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ACTIVE BLOCK: THE BLOCKING PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This article defines and discusses the blocking practice apparent in Israeli fine art photography of the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. The blocking practice is used in landscape photography and it is essentially realized when the photographer positions his main object in the center of the composition and so close to the picture plane in a way that blocks the viewer's field of vision and hides most of the other objects in the picture. The article presents it as an active and harsh practice and divides its embodiments in four: The first associated with Israeli building culture, the second with Israeli obsession with security measures, the third with segregation in the Israeli sphere and the last which is dubbed as "The Beautiful Block". The article clearly presents this practice as the most significant formative measure in contemporary Israeli photography which sets it apart from other currents in international landscape photography.

Keywords: Photography, Art, Israel, Landscape, Housing .

Öz

AKTİF BLOK: ÇAĞDAŞ İSRAİL GÜZEL SANATLAR FOTOĞRAFÇILIĞI ENGELLEME UYGULAMASI

Bu makale İsrail güzel sanatlar fotoğrafçılığında yirminci yüzyılın son on yılı ve yirmi birinci yüzyılın ilk on yılı arasında görülen engelleme uygulamasını tanımlamakta ve tartışmaktadır. Bu uygulama manzara fotoğrafçılığında kullanılır: Fotoğrafçı ana nesnesini kompozisyonun merkezine, resim düzlemine o kadar yakın yerleştirir ki izleyicinin görüş alanını engeller ve resimdeki diğer nesnelerin çoğunu saklar. Makale bunu aktif ve katı bir uygulama olarak sunmakta ve somut örneklerini

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dörde ayırmaktadır: İsrail inşaat geleneği, İsrail'in güvenlik önlemleri saplantısı, İsrail kültüründeki ayrımcılık ve "Güzel Engel" olarak adlandırılan teknik. Makale bu uygulamayı çağdaş İsrail fotoğrafçılığını diğer uluslararası manzara fotoğrafçılığı akımlarından ayıran önemli bir şekillendirici ilke olarak ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fotoğrafçılık, sanat, İsrail, manzara, iskân.

Territory and borders have always been major issues in the Israeli sphere and landscape has always been a leading genre in Israeli photography, whether in Zionist utilitarian or in fine art photography.[1] In the early 1990s the visual language of fine art photography in Israel became harsher, and the most emphatic expression of this phenomenon is the blocking practice found in landscape photography. It is a visual and compositional implement, but as we shall see, it is also an ideological one.

The essence of the blocking practice rests in the fact that the photographer positions his main object in the center of the composition and so close to the picture plane in a way that blocks the viewer's field of vision and hides most of the other objects in the picture. This is an active and even harsh practice: the viewer realizes he or she is looking at a landscape photograph and expects to experience what this sort of a photograph should deliver – a landscape – but the photographer frustrates the viewer, forces him or her to focus on the main object, and allows only a glimpse into the landscape stretching behind. In most cases the photographer forces the viewer to focus on a vulgar, ugly, or broken-down object located in the periphery or "backyard" of Israeli existence. There is always a perceptible correlation between this dissonant practice and the dismal and ugly surroundings depicted.

1 For Israeli landscape photography in general see: Guy Raz, "Only What His Eye Took In: A Comment on Local Landscape Photography," in *Framed Landscape: A Comment on Local Landscape Photography,* exhibition catalogue (Haifa: University of Haifa Art Gallery, 2005) 5-21 (Hebrew with an English summary).
For the landscape in Zionist photography see: Ruth Oren, *System and Themes - Aspects of the Jewish Landscape Photography in Israel, 1945-1963,* Dissertation, (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2005) (Hebrew with an English summary); Ruth Oren, "Zionist Photography 1910-1941: Constructing a Landscape," *History of Photography* 19, no. 3 (1995): 201-210; Ruth Oren, "Space, Place, Photography: National Identity and Local Landscape Photography, 1945-1963," in *Spatial Borders and Local Borders, A Photographic Discourse on Israeli Landscapes* (Tel Hai: The Open Museum of Photography, 2006), 164-188.
For landscape in Israeli fine art photography see: Jochai Rosen, "The Abused Landscape: The Works of Young Israeli Photographers," *Afterimage, A Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 35, no. 1 (2007): 23-27 and Jochai Rosen,"'Behold, I have set the land before you': The P6 Group and Critical Landscape Photography in Israel," in *Building a Place: The P6 Group and Critical Landscape Photography,* exhibition catalogue (Tel Aviv: Rubin Museum, 2010), 69-74.

The purpose of this study is to define the various embodiments of the blocking practice and by that to present it as the most important visual tool in Israeli landscape photography post 1990. This is done by dividing our discussion into four chapters: the first chapter deals with the blocking practice as part of the visual discourse on Israeli building culture. The second deals with the visual discourse on Israeli militarism; the third with the issue of disengagement in the Israeli sphere, and the fourth and final chapter deals with what we shall call "The Beautiful Block".

I. Israeli Building Culture

The blocking practice first appeared in the works of a small number of Israeli photographers who in the early 1990s began a critical study of the new housing projects in Israel.[2] The improved economic conditions of Israel during that period resulted in what can only be termed a building frenzy. In most cases Israelis erected buildings that looked like palaces and fortresses, which were patently foreign to their surroundings.[3] One of the first photographers to embark on a project recording these newly erected buildings was Gilad Ophir, and his photographs taken between the years 1992 and 1995 were later included in his solo exhibition in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art entitled "Cyclopean Walls".[4] While Ophir was mainly interested in the buildings erected in the new Israeli suburbia, Efrat Shvily was recording the massive development in the settlements of the West Bank. As part of this effort she took this picture of a house in Mitzpe Yericho (Figure 1).

This photograph is part of a project entitled "New Homes in Israel and the Occupied Territories" that Shvily carried out between 1992 and 1998.[5] The photograph depicts a simple box-shaped house made out of bricks and covered with a gabled tile roof. It stands on a plateau in a barren desert landscape. On both sides of the house the viewer gets a glimpse of the mountainous horizon. It seems as though the house has recently been completed since building debris covers the surrounding ground.

The house covers almost the entire height of the photograph and much of its width, in doing so blocking the viewer's field of vision. In Albertian terms we can say that the house is blocking the viewer's visual pyramid and by that, blocking Alberti's imaginary window.[6] In other words, the way Shvily uses the house goes against almost everything known to us from realistic western art of the modern era.

2 For Israeli building culture as reflected in photography see Raz, "Only What His Eye Took In," 17 and Rosen, "Behold, I have set the land," 72ff.

3 See Rona Sela, "Cyclopean Walls and Built Landscapes," in *Gilad Ophir: Cyclopean Walls,* exhibition catalogue (Tel Aviv: The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 1995), unpaged and Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 24.

4 Sela,"Cyclopean Walls," unpaged.

5 *Efrat Shvily. Point/Counterpoint: Works, 1992-2012,* exhibition catalogue (Ein Harod: Museum of Art, 2013), 20-69.

6 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting,* translated by Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 40ff. and particularly Figure I.

Figure 1. Efrat Shvily, *Untitled (Mitzpeh Yericho),* black and white photograph (negative), pigment print on archival paper, 25x38 cm, 1993

The house stands askew and thus does not appear to be functional. It seems as though Shvily did not bother herself with correcting this distortion, by that highlighting its alienation. The door and windows cut in the façade of the house make it anthropomorphic, but instead of looking amicable the small embrasure-like windows make this house look more like a military fortress whose aim is to control its surroundings and fend off potential invaders.[7] A house covered with tile roofing is an import brought by Zionist settlers from Europe. These houses are foreign to the desert climate, where they are completely dysfunctional.[8] All in all, and taking into consideration the fact that Shvily opted for a black and white photograph, we may speak of an aesthetic of unsightliness.

It must be said that the visual and theoretical roots of photographs such as Shvily's house, and others to be discussed in this article, lay in the works of the New Topographics and in Typological photography, in particular that of Bernd and Hila Becher and their followers. A deliberation over these roots is beyond the scope of this study, but they have recently been acknowledged by various authors.[9]

7 Vered Maimon, "Ideal Homes, Real Subjects: On Efrat Shvily's Photographs," In *Efrat Shvily. Point/Counterpoint: Works, 1992-2012,* exhibition catalogue (Ein Harod: Museum of Art, 2013), 14e.

8 Maimon, "Ideal Homes," 12e.

9 Ruti Direktor,"Bernd Becher 1931-2007", in *Hatsofa* Blog, January 24, 2009 at http://rutidirektor.wordpress.com/2009/01/24/%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%A0%D7%93-%D7%91%D7%9B%D7%A8-1931-2007-%D7%92%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%A9%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%A7%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A1%D7%A7%D7%99-1925-2007/; Maimon, "Ideal Homes," 11e-12e,

Housing was also the topic of a series of photographs by Yaacov Israel, who during the first decade of the third millennium took pictures of the immigrant neighborhoods built in Jerusalem during the 1950s. One of these photos depicts a housing block at 1 San Martin Street (Figure 2). These photographs were later exhibited together with photographs of Palestinian villages in an exhibition entitled "Yaacov Israel: A Repressed Landscape".[10]

The photograph shown here depicts the narrow side of a huge box-like housing block. The square shape of the building captures most of the picture's surface and leaves an almost equal strip around it. This strip does not reveal much information other than a simple fence in the foreground and a glimpse of a few parked cars in the right background, where in the distance the horizon can hardly be seen.

The edifice in Israel's photograph almost completely blocks the viewer's field of vision. Depicting this block from the side takes it out of its everyday context and transforms it into a new entity, in other words turns it into a visual means. This action by Israel also distances this housing block from the typological discourse, since this building cannot be typified from this angle.[11] This is not the angle that transmits necessary information about the building and therefore the housing block becomes a form, in this case a square. Moreover, the narrow side of the housing block is almost devoid of windows, a fact that creates a formalist emphasis on the "White Square". Photographs of Israel such as this Haikin has categorized as repressed landscape or what she also terms "no-place".[12] Ben-Dov writes that "Israel's gaze wounds, it is painful, even violent",[13] but it is rather what he compels his viewer to do by actively blocking his Albertian visual pyramid, which is violent and painful.

Yaacov Israel literally photographs "The Backyard" and in doing so is part of a sizeable phenomenon in Israeli contemporary photography that is only touched upon in this article and merits a different study.[14]

Vered Maimon, "Living Space: Distant Near," in Distant Near, exhibition catalogue, Curator: Wulf Herzogenrath (Herzliya: The Museum for Contemporary Art, 1998), unpaged (Hebrew); Sela, "Cyclopean Walls," unpaged; Raz, "Only What His Eye Took In," 16 and Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 24.

10 Naama Haikin, *Yaakov Israel: A Repressed Landscape* (Tel Hai: The Open Museum of Photography, 2005).

11 On typology in contemporary photography see: Marc Freidus, *Typologies: Nine Contemporary Photographers,* exhibition catalogue (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1991). For Bernd and Hilla Becher see: Armin Zweite, *Typologies of Industrial Buildings / Bernd and Hilla Becher* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

12 Haikin, *Yaakov Israel,* 36-37.

13 Eyal Ben-Dov, "Earthly Jerusalem", in *Yaakov Israel: A Repressed Landscape* (Tel Hai: The Open Museum of Photography,2005), 34.

14 The depiction of "The Backyard" is very common in contemporary Israeli photography but so far no study has been dedicated to this topic. Maor speaks of "infected landscapes" and specifies a few types of such landscapes in contemporary Israeli art. He further elaborates that the choice of

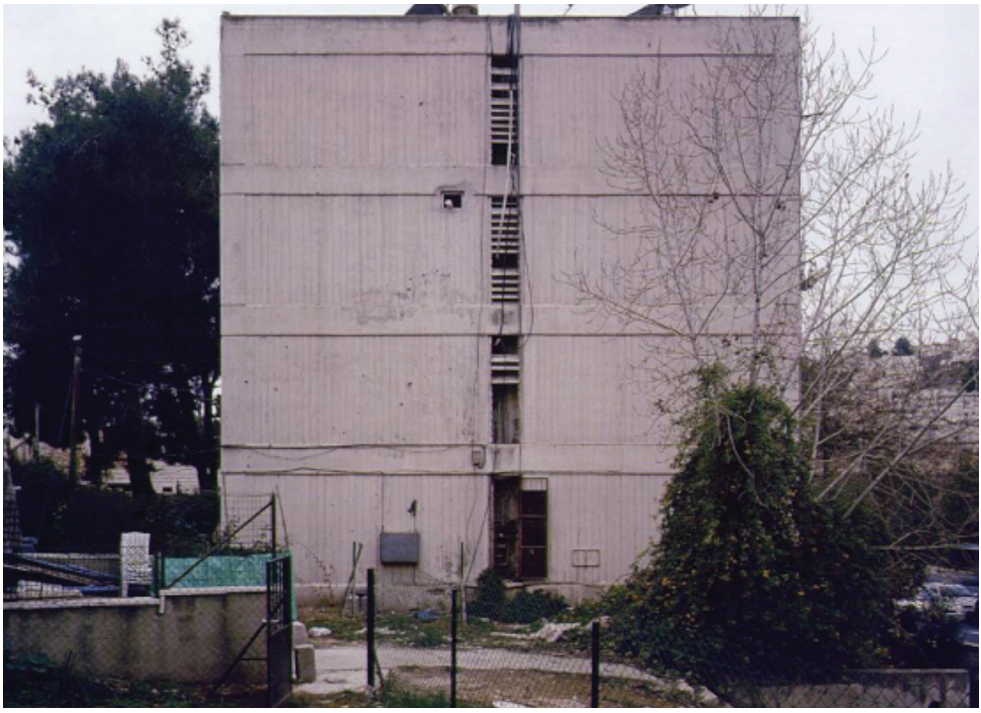

Figure 2. Yaacov Israel, *1 San Martin St., Jerusalem,* color photograph, Lambda Print, 83.5x106 cm, 2004

The house seen in Shvily's photograph (Figure 1) and that seen in Israel's work (Figure 2) both have only a few narrow windows. This is not a coincidence, since it is known that these housing blocks were not only meant to house newcomers but were also perceived as fortresses and defensive walls aimed at curbing potential invaders, which therefore had small embrasure-like windows.[15] The Giloh neighborhood that was built in Jerusalem after the 1967 war was built as a fortress from the outset, and became a fortress de facto during the Second Intifada when Palestinian militants shot at the neighborhood from nearby Bethlehem. This shooting lead to the further fortification of the neighborhood with a concrete disengagement wall and with bulletproof windows.[16] The housing block, as well as other buildings in

an artist to deal with a certain landscape turns it into a "Marked Landscape" and the starting point for a critical discourse. See Haim Maor, *Marked Landscapes: Landscape-Place in Contemporary Israeli Art,* exhibition catalogue (Beer Sheba: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2003), 7-8 (Hebrew).

15 Amiram Harlap, "Reinforced Concrete: On the Security Syndrome in Israeli Architecture," *Musag* 8 (1976), 13 (Hebrew) and Haim Yacobi and Shelly Cohen (eds.), *Separation: The Politics of Space in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved and Xargol 2006), 50-51 (Hebrew).

16 Rachel Kallus, "The Political Construct of the 'Everyday': The Role of Housing in Making Place

Israel, functioned not only as a physical barrier but also as a psychological barrier against a hostile environment, which touches upon the Israeli obsession with security, a topic dealt with in the following chapter.

II. Securitism

The obsession with security needs in Israel, and the fact that many restrictions on the Israeli individual are justified by them, is known today in Israeli slang by the term Securitism.[17] Security needs in Israel have rendered the military a sacred entity that for years was exempt from public debate. During the early 1990s and following a process of globalization and open-data policy, the army became for the first time the target of fierce criticism, which also found an emphatic expression in Israeli fine art photography.[18] Here too, photographers who needed extreme measures to slaughter this sacred cow used the blocking practice, as can be seen in a photograph by Guy Raz depicting a concrete roadblock (Figure 3).

Between the years 1992 and 1997 photographer Guy Raz set out to record Israeli check-posts in the West Bank in general and concrete roadblocks in particular.[19] This was part of a study he made into the obsession with security and separation in the Israeli sphere. One of the questions at hand was that of the limits of power that can be applied by a ruler over his subordinates. As part of this study he photographed a few concrete roadblocks erected during the British Mandate of Palestine (1918-1948),[20] relics of the futile British effort to govern this land. This was an effort made by Europeans to rule a foreign land by force, sometimes through the use of concrete roadblocks, an effort that is echoed by contemporary Israelis who

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and Identity," in *Constructing a Sense of Place: Architecture and the Zionist Discourse,* ed. Haim Yacobi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 136. For security considerations and the building of neighborhoods in Jerusalem see Eyal Weitzman, "Jerusalem: Petrifying the Holy City," in Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 25-52.

17 The original Hebrew term is Bitchonism from the word Bitachon, i.e., security, in Hebrew, one of the most common words in everyday Israeli discourse.

18 Raz, "Only What His Eye Took In," 17 and Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 24-25.

19 The Israeli check-points in the West Bank are not only the focus of a fierce debate within and outside the Israeli sphere, but they have also been the center of numerous studies. Particularly worth mentioning are Ariella Azoulay, *Chic-Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints* (Tel Aviv: Andalus, 2007) and Weitzman, "Checkpoints: The Split Sovereign and the One-Way Mirror," in *Hollow Land*, 138-159.

20 During their reign in Palestine the British forces erected anti-tank concrete barriers to fend off a possible attack from French Vichy forces from Syria, but also to fend off resistance from Arab militias and Jewish resistance groups. Some of these barriers still exist and can be seen today: In the Russian Compound in Jerusalem one can still see concrete barriers known as Dragon's Teeth and a complete barrier still stands on the shores of the Sea of Galilee near Kibbutz Haon. Guy Raz's study of concrete anti-tank barriers in Israel covered old barriers erected by the British, the French Vichy, and Jordanian and Syrian armies, but so far no other study has been devoted to this topic.

are predominantly unwilling to acknowledge this precedent. In his photographs Raz limited himself to a minimum of visual elements and many of them, as indeed our example, bear a striking similarity to abstract paintings and particularly to the works of Kazimir Malevich.[21] The works of Yaacov Israel (Figure 2) and Guy Raz (Figure 3) are characterized by what can easily be dubbed the photographed Suprematist square.

Raz's project also touches upon another central and heavily debated issue in the Israeli sphere – that of separation and segregation, not only between Israelis and Palestinians, but also between rich and poor as well as between other factions of Israeli society. This issue will be discussed in the ensuing chapter.

Figure 3. Guy Raz, from the series *Road-Blocks*, color photograph, c. 1991-1997

These roadblocks are essentially large concrete cubes with an iron hook mounted on the top. They are then usually painted with a simple pattern of two colors separated by a diagonal line, a pattern used to denote certain army units. This concrete cube became such a common feature in the Israeli sphere that by now it has gained an iconic status and appears frequently in Israeli art and design.[22]

21 See particularly Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 106x106 cm, St. Petersburg, The State Russian Museum.

22 The concrete roadblock discussed here appears, for example, in the works of Eran Shakine (*Floating*, 2008, concrete and neon lights, 115x115x115 cm), in a few paintings by Joram Rozov (for example, *Road block*, oil on canvas, 80x80 cm); designer Yuval Eshel turned it into a miniature door-stop (See http://www.yuvaleshel.com/.)The overall aesthetics and absurdity of the separation wall and concrete roadblocks were addressed by Michael Faust and Ariel Belinco in their animated film *Beton* of 2006; see http://bezalel.secured.co.il/8/beton.swf

The photograph shown here (Figure 3) is in a square format - based on a 6x6 camera - and thus matches the format of the concrete cube. The cube takes up almost the entire surface of the photograph, leaving only a very narrow strip between the edges of the cube and the frame. The cube is colored in beige; a white triangle is painted on top of it to create two triangles that are then separated by a blue diagonal line. The coloring is crude and haphazard and thus some of the white and blue colors drip down over the beige. Although it is clear that the cube is standing outdoors, it is almost impossible to make out the details of the landscape stretching behind, and the viewer can only discern an asphalt road, another colored roadblock, a few electric poles, a hint of the horizon, and the blue sky above.

As in the two photographs discussed previously (Figure 1, 2), the main object in Raz's photograph blocks the viewer's pyramid of vision, and its depiction from close range takes it out of the ordinary context and away from the typological discourse. This concrete cube becomes a new entity, a visual means and an implement used to control the viewer's gaze. There is a correlation between the brutal subject depicted in the photograph and the measure enforced on the viewer. Despite this brutality, the image is still appealing due to its pleasant aesthetics.

The most characteristic expression of the critical study of Israeli militarism in photography during the 1990s is undoubtedly "Necropolis", a joint project of photographers Roi Kuper and Gilad Ophir carried out between 1996 and 2000. A typical product of this project would be Kuper's image of a concrete bunker (Figure 4).

During the early 1990s, due to severe budget cuts, the IDF deserted many army camps situated on wide and expensive plots of real-estate and moved to more modest quarters. For a certain period these old camps were left open to the public and revealed the wide extent of brutalism carried on in these closed surroundings away from public scrutiny. Kuper and Ophir wandered through these deserted camps and meticulously recorded abandoned edifices and objects. This project was entitled "Necropolis", i.e. City of the Dead, after ancient burial grounds that were situated in remote places away from the public.

Kuper's photograph depicts a concrete bunker covered with bullet holes and marked with the digit four. This is part of a rather monotonous series of similar photographs of bunkers. The bunker stands against the barely visible horizon, a plot of barren land is seen in the foreground, and the sky stretches above. Overall this is a harsh and unpleasant image and it displays many of the characteristics of the photographs described above.

Apart from its obvious discourse on Israeli Securitism, this image questions the Israeli obsession with concrete. From their outset, cement and concrete were

Figure 4. Roi Kuper, From the series *Necropolis*, black and white photograph,c. 1996-2000

identified with the Zionist building effort,[23] and concrete became known as "the Israeli material" associated with the Sabra, the native Israeli.[24] One of Israel's leading architects was quoted as saying "for us, concrete was the Israeli material. Concrete gave one a sense of stability: when you plant it in a place, no one will move it from there."[25]

23 Or Alexandrovitch, "Eolianite, Cement, Arabs, Jews: How to Build a Hebrew City," *Theory and Criticism* 36 (2010): 76-77 (Hebrew).

24 Zvi Efrat, *The Israeli Project: Construction and Architecture 1948-1973* (Tel Aviv: The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004), vol. 1, 105.

25 Efrat, *The Israeli Project*, vol. 1, 107. For concrete in Israeli culture see: Yehudit Matzkel, *The Song of Concrete*, exhibition catalogue (Tel Aviv: Eretz Israel Museum, 2009) (Hebrew). Concre-

This photograph by Kuper is yet another example of the aesthetic of unsightliness discussed above. Kuper admits that this was a deliberate choice, to avoid the appealing and beautiful in order to focus the viewer on the harsh reality.[26] This goal was also aided by the brutal blocking of the viewer's pyramid of vision.

During work on the project "Necropolis" the two photographers – Kuper and Ophir – walked through the deserted military camps, each carrying his own camera and taking pictures. Both were applying the blocking practice, and the similar visual language makes it almost impossible to separate their works one from the other. Ophir created his own series of buildings and objects, and one of the most striking of them depicts the perforated remains of military vehicles used as shooting targets (Figure 5).

This photograph depicts a frontal view of an army truck torn and obliterated by bullet holes as it stands in a barren landscape. The truck is so close to the picture plane as to almost completely hide anything that stands behind it. The viewer has only a glimpse of the hilly horizon dotted with four shooting targets.

This photograph displays most of the visual aspects discussed above, which need not be repeated here. It is worth mentioning, though, that its anthropomorphic appearance and its two poked out "eyes" make this obliterated truck all the more pitiful.

Buildings covered with bullet holes are a central ingredient of heroic national sites associated with ghetto fighters and with the Israeli struggle for independence.[27] By depicting at close range buildings and vehicles punctured by bullet holes, Kuper and Ophir were able to reverse this attitude and depict them as victims of violence and frustration. From this point on, buildings punctured by bullet holes would be-

te as a central ingredient in the fulfillment of the Zionist vision is also a topic in Hebrew poetry; there it appears as a material that helps to anchor Jewish presence in the Middle East. See Hanan Haver, "Cement Trap to Ivory!" in Matzkel, *The Song of Concrete*, 27-28, 38 (Hebrew).

26 Interview with Roi Kuper of July 24, 2011.

27 There are numerous sites in Israel from the War of Independence left scarred with bullet holes so as to serve as memorials. To name but a few: the old water tower of Kibbutz Negba; an old British police station of Iraq Suwaydan now known as Metzudat Yoav (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negba); the old water tower of Kibbutz Be'erot Yitzhak; the old water tower in Kibbutz Yad Mordechai (which also, coupled with a statue of Mordechai Anielewicz, serves as memorial to both the Warsaw Ghetto fighters as well as the defenders of the Kibbutz (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yad_Mordechai); the old city council building in Jerusalem, and a British post and a commercial center in Safed. One of these heroic sites still bearing the marks of bullet holes is Zion Gate in Jerusalem, where a crucial battle occurred during the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. This site was recorded by photographer Shai Kremer: *Zion Gate*, 2010, color photograph. See Shai Kremer, *Shai Kremer. Fallen Empires* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2011), 36-37. So far no study has been devoted to this topic.

Figure 5. Gilad Ophir, From the series *Necropolis*, black and white photograph c. 1996-2000

come a recurring visual motif in the works of Israeli photographers dealing with brutality in the Israeli sphere.[28]

In his essay *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* Vilem Flusser differs between "people taking snaps" on the one hand and photographers on the other. According to him, the former do not create innovative images; namely, they are not original. In his words, "they do not look for 'new moves'" and they cannot decode photographs.[29] The later, 'the real photographers', are "interested… in seeing in continually new ways, i.e. producing new, informative states of things."[30] Thus far

28 See, for example, Assaf Evron, *Old Gesher, British Mandatory Police Station*, 2006, color photographs in Iris Mendel, *Assaf Evron, Near and Apparent* (Tel Aviv: The Heder Contemporary Art, 2007), 34-43; Shai Kremer, *"Chicago" Ground Force Training Zone*, 2007, color photographs in Shai Kremer, *Shai Kremer: Infected Landscapes. Israel, Broken Promised Land* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2008), 58-63.

29 Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, translated by Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 57-58.

30 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy*, 59; see also Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy*, 37, 47.

it has been established that the photographers discussed in this article have definitely created a new outlook on reality and therefore they clearly fall under Flusser's definition of real and innovative photographers. We might even expand our application of Flusser's theory: he speaks of "The Photographic Universe" that turns the spectators into programmed robots, who react automatically as they are detached from their humanity. He asserts that only a few people, among them original photographers, "are struggling against this automatic programming".[31] In light of this assertion by Flusser, I move to suggest that the photographers under discussion here are definitely fighting against this automatic programming by actively forcing their viewer to look at what they set in front of him and not give in to his tendency to act like a robot.

Maor saw the action taken by these photographers as an act of erasure and censorship; in other words, he understood it as an act that is applied on the image and erases from it certain details, like a censor would.[32] I, on the other hand, speak of an active action that is applied to the viewer, blocking his or her pyramid of vision and forcing the viewer to look at the ugly object and not at the 'glorious' landscape behind it.

In this context we may apply Flusser's principle of scanning. He asserts that the "significance of the image as revealed in the process of scanning… represents a synthesis of two intentions: one manifested in the image and the other belonging to the observer".[33] I maintain that the blocking practice applied by the photographers under discussion here operates actively to manipulate the perception of the viewer. In other words, there is an active approach to the dynamics between these two intentions and not merely satisfaction with censorship or treatment of what Flusser defines as "the surface".[34] After all, it is Flusser who asserts that "photographers have power over those who look at their photographs, they program their actions…".[35]

III. Segregation

Segregation in all its embodiments is a major issue in the Israeli sphere; it finds various forms and is based on various justifications,[36] but it is usually enforced using the most common justification in Israel, i.e., security needs. In other words, segregation which finds its expression through the erection of walls and,

31 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy,* 74.
32 Maor, *Marked Landscapes,* 11.
33 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy,* 8.
34 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy,* 8.
35 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy,* 30.
36 Yacobi and Cohen, *Separation*, 15; Meir Wigoder, "The Blocked Gaze: A User's Guide to Photographing the Separation Barrier-Wall," *Public Culture* 22, no. 2 (2010): 299-300 and Juliana Ochs, *Security and Suspicion: An Ethnography of Everyday Life in Israel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

fences, as well as barriers and restrictions of all sorts, is mainly the result of the above-mentioned Securitism. Two of the most striking manifestations of segregation erected in Israel of the new millennium are the Giloh Wall, which stood between 2000 and 2010, and the Disengagement Wall, erected in 2002 to separate between Israel and the West Bank.[37] Both these walls were erected by the Israeli government in an effort to protect the civilian population and calm down unrest among Israeli citizens in light of the Palestinian uprising and a wave of suicide bombings.[38] These two walls served as a focus of attraction; they were shown constantly in TV newsreels, photographed on numerous occasions, and appeared regularly on the internet. Soon they became a Mecca for artists too, and attracted graffiti artists as well as photographers.[39] As subjects of photographers they soon served as a tool to intensify the practice of blocking, as can be seen in a photograph by Shai Kremer (Figure 6).

In the early days of the new millennium, Shai Kremer embarked on a journey similar in many ways to that taken by his predecessors, and on some occasions his teachers mentioned above.[40] Disturbed by Israeli brutalization of the land and its occupants, he began recording what would later turn into his book entitled *Infected Landscape* with its poignant subtitle, *Israel, Broken Promised Land*.[41]

37 The Disengagement Wall has been the subject of endless articles and photographs in recent years. Its historical background, as well as its cultural and political implications, are beyond the scope of this essay. See Weitzman, "The Wall: Barrier Archipelagos and the Impossible Politics of Separation," in *Hollow Land*, 161-182 and Adi Lourie-Hayon, "Existence and the Other: Borders of Identity in Light of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict," *Afterimage, the Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Activism* 34, nos. 1-2 (2006): 22-26. This essay includes photographs of the Disengagement Wall by Miki Kratzman and Dana Levy and references to other sources on this topic.
The Disengagement Wall is a recurring motif in contemporary Israeli art. The conflict between Israeli security forces and local population in the West Bank has been a major topic in the works of Israeli artist David Reeb. As part of his continuous study he recorded numerous views of the Disengagement Wall; see, for example, *Wall #1*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 100x150 cm and *Wall #6*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 100x150 cm. The wall also recurs in the paintings of Joram Rozov (see, for example, *The Separation Wall I*, oil on canvas, 50x50 cm). In 2009, artist Shelly Federman created an event in the Tel Aviv beach during which sea mattresses in the form of concrete slabs were used by spectators to float in the sea. See http://observers.france24.com/content/20090929-floating-separation-wall-tel-aviv-art-show-shelly-federman. Recently artist Michael Halak created an enormous installation-painting of the wall entitled *I Will Dress You a Gown of Concrete and Cement*, 2014, oil on canvas, 800x300 cm. For an example of a photographic investigation of The Disengagement Wall see Wigoder, "The Blocked Gaze," 293-308.

38 These events were part of what is known as "The Second Intifada", the second Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation, which took place between the years 2000 and 2005.

39 See Avinoam Shalem and Gerhard Wolf, *Facing the Wall: the Palestinian-Israeli Barriers*, photographs by Dror Maayan (Cologne: W. Konig, 2011).

40 Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 25.

41 Kremer, *Shai Kremer: Infected Landscapes.*

Figure 6. Shai Kremer, *The Separation Wall, Baka El Ghabya*, color photograph, 2004

The photograph brought here depicts a road leading to an open gate erected in the midst of a fence covered with three layers of barbed wire. Behind the fence stretches a concrete wall made out of vertical slabs, each with a hole at the top. In front of the wall a blurred image of a man standing in the open gate is seen, while a power line and a pole are seen in the upper right corner.

The photograph depicts an absurd scene: a gate leading to nowhere and, moreover, to a wall that is blocking any option of passing. The wall and fence with barbed wire look very much like the enclosures of a prison, leaving only a narrow stretch of sky; combined with the ghost-like figure, this makes for a depressing image. The road and power lines create an illusion of depth inviting the beholder to pass through, but the wall that blocks the entire span of the composition makes this impossible – the viewer's pyramid of vision is now completely blocked and he or she is left frustrated, just like those the wall aims to keep segregated from one another.

Since the psychologically depressing impact of such walls was obvious to those who were in charge of erecting them, they embarked on a naïve effort to

solve this problem, an effort recorded in a photograph by Gaston Zvi Ickowicz (Figure 7).

Between 2003 and 2006 Gaston Zvi Ickowicz traveled intensively throughout the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. He photographed the scenery and made portraits of settlers. A significant portion of his output was dedicated to the various disengagement walls aimed at protecting these settlers.[42]

The photograph brought here depicts in the forefront an asphalt covered road with a metal safety railing on its margins. Immediately behind it stands a concrete

Figure 7. Gaston Zvi Ickowicz, From the series *Settlement*, color photograph, c. 2003-2006

42 Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 26.

wall made out of two rows of concrete slabs with metal hooks on the top. The composition is topped with a narrow strip of sky within which is a hint of a power line. The wall is painted with a tromp l'oeil image of a semicircular window displaying what can only be understood as clear blue skies hovering above a green pasture!

Figure 8. Noa Ben Shalom, *Settlement in Gaza Strip,* color photograph, 2005

This too is an absurd image, depicting a false window that fails to allay the depressing feeling of confinement.[43]

The use of concrete security walls to create an absolute block reaches a climax in a photograph by Noa Ben Shalom (Figure 8).

Noa Ben Shalom, like so many other photographers, went to record the evacuation of the Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip during the summer of 2005. While other photographers concentrated on either the violent encounter between the evacuating police forces and the resisting settlers or the destruction in the aftermath,

43 This picture by Gaston Zvi Ickowicz touches upon a widespread phenomenon in Israel. Since concrete walls and shelters are seen everywhere there is a constant need to soften their depressing effect; thus, a sub-culture has developed of naïve painting that cover them. These naïve images then serve as the focus of photographs by artists who aim to point at the absurd of this undertaking.

Ben Shalom focused her attention on the forgotten corners and created benign and toned-down images of this crisis.[44]

The photograph here shows the all too familiar concrete wall made out of slabs and painted in white blocking the entire composition. In the center stands a large menorah leaning against the wall, while the ground beneath it is covered with weeds and littered with rubble. In this photograph Ben Shalom not only uses the wall to completely block the viewers' vision, but uses it cleverly to incarcerate Israel's national symbol in a sad and neglected corner in order to enhance the sense of national crisis.

It is quite obvious by now that segregation walls, so common in the Israeli sphere, served in the hands of a few photographers as implements to further radicalize the practice of blocking and by doing so their message.

Figure 9. Yair Barak, From the series *Earthworks*, color photograph, 2005

44 Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 25-26.

IV. The Beautiful Block

As we have seen above in the photograph of Raz (Figure 3), despite the harsh topic, refined aesthetics were no stranger to some of the photographers. The return to color photography manifested in works from the new millennium (Figures 2, 6-8) is one of the expressions of a change towards more aesthetically appealing images.

Indeed, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a shift in Israeli art in what was termed "The rebirth of beauty".[45] Artists deserted the previously poor and hard aesthetics for the lavish and rich. This shift was felt in photography as well; it did not entail a neglect of the blocking practice but rather its use in a new context, as can be seen in a photograph by Yair Barak (Figure 9).

During the early years of the new millennium Yair Barak focused his attention on quarries and studied their aesthetics. His thrust, although certainly motivated by a critical approach, was focused to a large extent on a formalistic quest.[46] The photograph presented here depicts an open landscape dominated in the middle by a large rock formation, with a green pasture in the foreground and blue sky above. A careful examination of the image reveals that the rock formation is not a natural cliff but rather the edge of a man-made quarry. Despite this, it is still an awe-inspiring image. Moreover, we must bear in mind that quarries were for decades perceived in Israel as heroic sites where the stones to build the homeland were cut.[47] It was only during the 1970s that this perception started to shift and people began looking at quarries as ecological disasters. The composition is well balanced, using aprecise symmetry and a harmonious division into three horizontal strips of blue, white and green. Notwithstanding, this photograph embodies a contradiction: on the surface it appears beautiful and pleasant, but deep inside it conceals an ugly scar. We can only speak of an apparent beauty, and the blocking rock formation serves again to make the viewer pause and realize that.

A similar implementation of the blocking practice can be observed in a photograph by Assaf Evron from the series *Near and Apparent* (Figure 10).[48]

This photograph depicts an artificial precipice topped by the skeletal remains of an edifice. In the lower left corner stands a ladder-like wooden pole. The pho-

45 Amitai Mendelsohn, "The End of Days and New Beginnings: Reflections on Art in Israel, 1998-2007," in *Real Time. Art in Israel 1998-2008* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2008), 17; Amitai Mendelsohn, "The Rebirth of Beauty in Contemporary Israeli Art," *Protocols of History and Theory* 3 (2006), Bezalel Academy of Art and Design (online in Hebrew) and Hagai Segev, *Beyond Richness. Farewell to 'The Want of Matter'*, exhibition catalogue (Ashdot Yaacov: Rami and Uri Nechushtan Museum, 2006).

46 Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 25.

47 On the heroic aura of the quarry and of stonecutters in Zionism as reflected in art see Gid'on Efrat, "From the Personification of Nature to the Punishing of Nature," *Studio, Art Magazine* 33 (1992): 8 (Hebrew).

48 Mendel *Assaf Evron* and Rosen, "The Abused Landscape," 26.

Figure 10. Assaf Evron, From the series *Near and Apparent,* color photograph, c. 2005-2007

tograph actually shows the foundations of an old house that was revealed during construction work. The edifice was thus taken out of context, having lost its original form, and looks like a temple or an oversized microchip. Evron uses a very simple, almost serene composition based on only four visual elements.

Tamir Sher uses a similar device in a photograph from the series *Mars* (Figure 11). The photograph depicts an urban landscape. Here again the composition is completely blocked by a makeshift fence made out of galvanized sheets of metal supported by wooden beams. A barren field stretches before the fence, which almost completely hides a row of apartment buildings, while the skies are blackened to create a Martian atmosphere. It is interesting to note that despite the unsightly de-

Figure 11. Tamir Sher, From the series *Mars*, color photograph, c. 2005-2006

tails that comprise this photograph, the overall impression is a highly aesthetic and intriguing.

Conclusions

As has become clear from this study, the four embodiments of the blocking practice discussed above are definitely intertwined. One cannot separate housing projects in Israel from security needs; the constant preoccupation with security is the underlying reason for the erection of numerous walls and barriers, and these brutal surroundings certainly call for beautification. The blocking practice is thus a radical means with which to tackle a radical and ongoing state of affairs.

The blocking practice developed in two almost distinct chronological stages that reflect generational as well as stylistic change: The first generation of photographers, born during the late 1950s and early 1960s, changed the visual language of Israeli photography during the 1990s and established it firmly as an art medium.[49] Roi Kuper, Gilad Ophir, Efrat Shvily and Guy Raz took part in an opposing discourse with Zionist and Israeli glorifying iconography.[50] The second generation of photographers, born during the early 1970s, did not feel the need to be as harsh as their predecessors; they continued using the blocking practice as a critical tool but created softer and more aesthetically appealing photographs. There are two main explanations for this change: First of all, this mellowing occurred because the primary initial goal, to shock the Israeli viewer, had already been achieved by the first generation, and by then it was necessary to lure the viewer using a different means, in this case beauty. The second explanation has to do with the globalization which swept the Israeli scene around the turn of the millennium.[51] Global forces both changed the goals of Israeli photographers and acted to soften their visual language and means in order to appeal to a wider crowd not necessarily versed in the Israeli sphere. Photographers of the second generation therefore did not perceive themselves as mere reformers but rather functioned like any other fine art photographer in the global art market who is eager to sell his works of art.

The blocking practice stands in contradiction to the foundations of western art. According to Alberti, a painting is like a window frame through which the beholder sees reality, while our photographers place a wall in front of the window and block the view. Not only does it shatter conventions as to the description of landscape, but it uses conventional visual means, such as symmetry, to allow for aesthetic discourse of the unsightly. In any event, the blocking practice is certainly the most striking visual and ideological phenomenon in post 1990 Israeli fine art photography.

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49 For Israeli art of the 1990s see Doron Rabina, *Eventually We'll Die: Young Art in Israel of the Nineties*, exhibition catalogue (Herzliya: Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008). Following the success of "Necropolis" Roi Kuper and Gilad Ophir became among the first Israeli fine art photographers to be represented by an art gallery; this was just one of the signs that the Israeli art scene was willing to accept photographers.

50 Maor, *Marked Landscapes,* 9.

51 Mendelsohn,"The End of Days," 16 and 26.

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