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Shifting sights: civilian militarism in Israeli art and visual culture

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Publication date
2012

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Roei, N. (2012). *Shifting sights: civilian militarism in Israeli art and visual culture*.

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CHAPTER I

CANONS OF ISRAELI SOCIETY

... perhaps our inability to see what we see is also of critical concern.

--Judith Butler, "Photography, War, Outrage" (826)

In this chapter I address a catalogue of a small exhibition from 2004 entitled *Uniform Ltd: Soldier Representations in Contemporary Israeli Art*. The exhibition, an end-product of the yearly curatorship course at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Beer-Sheva, was on display at the Avraham Baron art gallery on the university campus. It consisted of artworks of various media, including oil painting, photography, installation, and video by sixteen Israeli artists. The artworks varied widely in their aesthetics and focus, from Ronit Agassi's installation *Petals* (2002–03), which consisted of dried leaves pierced with the shapes of media images of soldiers, to Ofek Wertman's video animation *Game Not Over* (2003), based a computer combat game. The catalogue of the exhibition, an A5-size booklet, includes three introductory texts, followed by short descriptions of the artists and color reproductions of their works. The catalogue is bilingual, and its two languages – Hebrew and English – each open at one side of the booklet and meet at its center.

The abundance of military themes in Israeli artworks and the apparent ease with which an exhibition on this topic fits into the national cultural arena are indicative of a larger cultural phenomenon in Israel. In this chapter, I inquire into the soldier's prominent position in Israeli art, whether the figure is embraced or criticized. I do so through close reading, not so much of the artworks in this show but rather of the exhibition catalogue, to problematize the ways in which representations of soldiers in art are themselves represented: how they are framed, perceived, and offered up to the audience. As a frame twice removed from the artworks themselves, the catalogue underscores the fact that our encounter with images is always already embedded in cultural, historical, theoretical, or ideological contexts. It thus raises questions that precede criticism, questions related to framing and to perception, concisely articulated in the quote from Judith Butler that serves as the epigraph of this chapter.

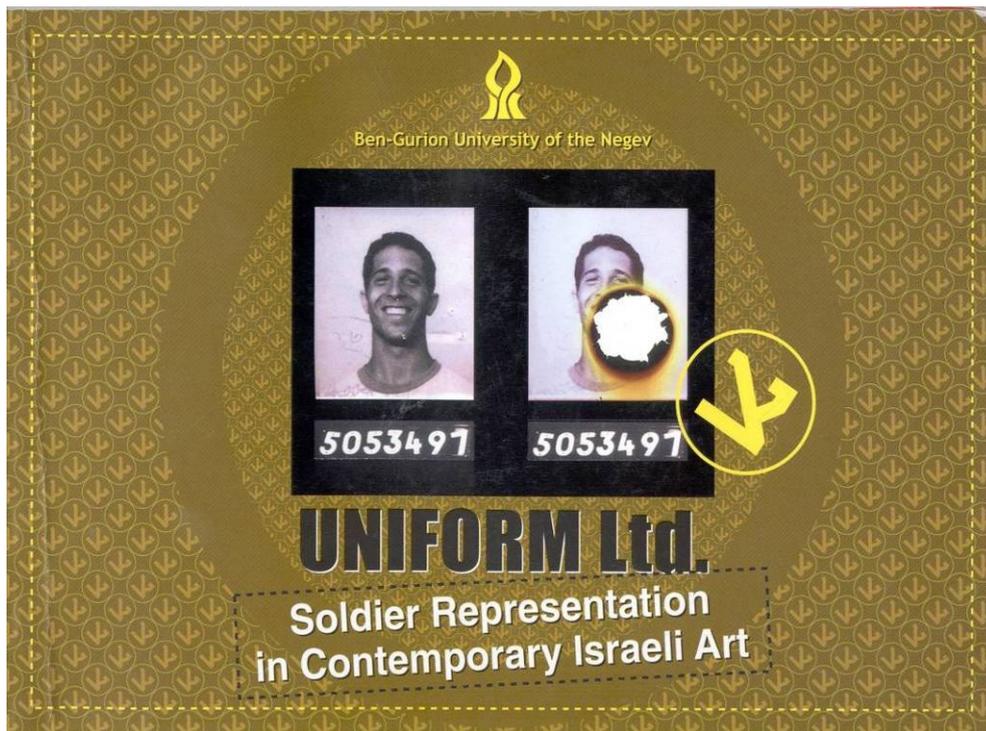


Figure 1.1. Catalogue cover, English front.
Uniform Ltd.: Soldier Representations in Contemporary Israeli Art. 2004.
Cover design by Sefi Sinay.



Figure 1.2. Catalogue cover, Hebrew front.
Uniform Ltd.: Soldier Representations in Contemporary Israeli Art. 2004.
Cover design by Sefi Sinay.

Butler poses her concern about the framing of sight in relation to the phenomenon of “embedded reporting” in the second Iraq war, when journalists and photographers agreed to report from within the perspective of military or governmental authorities, to secure access to the action (“Photography” 822). She concludes that every photograph (from that war specifically, but also more generally) is an interpretation insofar as it delimits what will fit within the frame of vision (“Photography” 823).¹¹ Butler’s concern with embedded reporting and with the interpretative aspect of the frame in contemporary warfare can be generalized to other, more mundane instances in visual culture, where tacit agreements over the angle from which an image, an idea, or a theme are portrayed and interpreted are constructed gradually and informally, maybe even unconsciously. In those cases, too, “to learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter” (“Photography” 826).

Preceding Butler’s caution, while answering its concern, Bal foregrounds the act of framing as an indispensable complement to the analysis of images. For Bal, the emphasis lies in the dynamic nature of the frame: showing is a form of framing, which is, in turn, a form of performance (Bal, *Travelling* 140, 173). The act of framing produces an event, and awareness of the frame as event calls for the accountability of its performing agents (*Travelling* 135). Bal’s formulation draws on Jacques Derrida’s *The Truth In Painting*, in which the picture frame is conceptualized as *parergon*, something situated neither inside nor outside the work, while nevertheless giving rise to the work and affecting its meaning:

That which [the *parergon*] puts in place – the instances of the frame, the title, the signature, the legend, etc. – does not stop disturbing the *internal* order of discourse on painting, its works, its commerce, its evaluation, its surplus-values, its speculation, its law, and its hierarchies. (Derrida, *Truth* 9; emphasis in text)

As Robin Marriner makes clear, Derrida’s analysis goes beyond the picture-frame as such, and means to attend to the structure within which our thinking about objects takes place. The frame, as framework, implies that “our vision of

¹¹ Butler expands on this argument in *Frames of War*, where she “draw[s] attention to the epistemological problem raised by this issue of framing: the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured” (1).

[the work's] 'interiority', will be formed and informed by what we take and bring to it as 'exterior'" (Marriner 352–54). In the same vein, Bal conceptualizes framing as the process within which (art) objects are set up by various *a priori* knowledge paradigms: art historical, curatorial, contextual, and so forth (Bal, *Travelling* 141–45). The frame, here, is not necessarily a concrete, material structure, and subsists within the image (as in Butler's example of embedded reporting), around the image (as in Derrida's quote above, through captions and titles), and within the mind of its beholders (as in Bal's account of the framing as event).

As parergon, the catalogue of *Uniform Ltd.* both emerges from the exhibition and affects its meaning. Some of its features expose its position as an agent of framing, and make explicit what the catalogue brings to bear on the theme of soldier representations, while others downplay it through the vocabulary of context to determine the meaning of the exhibit.¹² In what follows, I examine which frames of meaning are at work in the set-up of the exhibition, how they are camouflaged, and what internal tensions within these frames reveal themselves through symptomatic signs and symbols. However, as an agent of framing, I too am held accountable for what I bring to bear on the object that I analyze (Bal, *Travelling* 135–36). For my part, I employ the prism of "civilian militarism" as the frame for my investigation, in this chapter as well as those that follow, as a means to understand how militaristic images, concepts, and idioms are mobilized in Israeli society on levels that exceed the military proper, in ways that go mostly unquestioned and unproblematized. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the catalogue texts within the frame of sociological studies of Israeli militarism. Next, I analyze the catalogue cover to see what aspects of civilian militarism it reveals. The final part of the chapter focuses on the considerable difference between the English title of the exhibition and its Hebrew counterpart, which translates roughly as "you're a cannon!" in order to contrast two frames of reference with each other and, in so doing, to offer a methodology for teasing out and analyzing built-in significations and constructed frames of vision.

¹² The reliance on context in the construction of meaning has been problematized by Jacques Derrida in "Signature, Event, Context" (1977) and elucidated in Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* (1985). Culler and, later, Bal and Bryson suggest "framing" as a concept that may circumvent the limitations of "context" as it offers a heightened awareness to the constructed-ness of meaning involved in the interpretation of signs (Culler, *Framing* xiv). See also Bryson, "Art." For the fortunes of "context" in the social sciences and the humanities see Dilley.

The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue are less known than some of the works they include, and are more peripheral, even ephemeral, in comparison to other exhibitions that have dealt with the topic.¹³ My interest in the *Uniform Ltd.* catalogue lies in its presentation of multiple, at times opposing, attitudes towards its subject matter – artistic representations of soldiers – as well as towards the relation between artworks and their framing agents, such as curators, critics, or historians. This chapter, then, is about the juxtaposition of frames and frameworks: about weighing the hegemonic narrative of military themes in Israeli art against alternative readings; the call for objective, didactic presentations of artworks against the understanding of the art field as a stage on which a constant negotiation among various elements takes place; and the potential insights of visual critique against the ever-present limitation, of critical concern to this study, of our inability to see the frames that construct our vision.

The Fortunes of the Soldier-Figure in Israeli Art

The *Uniform Ltd.* exhibition catalogue includes three introductory texts. The first, authored by the main curator, Haim Maor, reviews soldier representations in the Israeli art scene and locates the current exhibition within this trend. The second text, written by cultural theorist Haim Grossman, narrates the demythologization process that the figure of the soldier has gone through in popular culture since the early 1970s. The third text, by co-curators Ofer Antebi and Carmit Dahari, introduces the exhibition and its sub-themes. Because the texts contain similar attitudes towards the place of the soldier in Israeli visual culture, I discuss the catalogue as a whole.

Generally, the texts narrate a change in attitude towards the soldier figure in Israeli society, culture, and the arts. Until the early 1970s, they explain, the soldier cohesively symbolized the Jewish hegemonic national collective, while at present this figure is much more fragmented, much like the collective it indexes. Contemporary artists follow the nation's critical turn in their deconstruction of the ideal image of the

¹³ A few examples include *The Khaki Color* (curator: Gideon Ofrat, Habima Theater, 1991), *Olive-Green* (curator: Ariella Azoulay, Bograshov Gallery, 1992), *Fire Zone 1* and *Fire Zone 2* (curator: Tali Tamir, Ha'Kibbutz Gallery 2002), and *Etchings, Scratches and Scars: Changing Representations of the Israeli Soldier* (curator: Sigal Barkai, Petach-Tikva Museum, 2008).

male soldier (Maor, “Color” 110–109; Antebi and Dahari 99–97). Soldiers can nowadays be represented as objects of desire, repulsion, or care. They may be portrayed as heartless machines at times and as marionettes on other occasions, as being in control of the image or as being completely vulnerable (Maor, “Color” 109–107; Antebi and Dahari 97–94). *Uniform Ltd.* offers four comments on this variegated phenomenon under the sub-themes of “Field Artist,” “Puppet Soldier,” “Mother’s Voice,” and “The Sensitive Gender-less Soldier.”

This narrative is not uncommon, as other publications have similarly dealt with the waning status of the soldier-figure in Israeli society. Haim Grossman has written extensively about images of soldier-heroes in popular culture, and notes their disappearance around the early 1970s.¹⁴ Gideon Ofrat offers an art-historical overview to show that soldiers are nowadays portrayed in more diverse and critical ways than they had been in the past (Ofrat, “Soldier” 229, 233). In these as well as other texts, this shift is attributed to the aftermaths of two wars: the Six Day War of 1967, taken to be Israel’s most successful war, and the Yom Kippur War of 1973, which is marked as a traumatic event in Israeli collective memory. The collapse of the belief in the IDF’s invincibility on the one hand, and the occupational function that the army has fulfilled since the annexation of territory during the 1967 war on the other, unsettled the established consensus towards the army in general and the figure of the soldier in particular (Mishori 12–13; Grossman, “Soldier” 53; Ofrat, “Soldier” 230).¹⁵ This “anti-militaristic” trend, in the words of sociologist Yoram Peri, has gradually moved from the fringe to the heart of the artistic institution, and is also to be found in contemporary literature, cinema, and theatre (“Radical” 257).

A parallel tendency is to be found in Israeli academia where critical studies on the Israeli military are not uncommon. A comprehensive survey indicates that the IDF

¹⁴ See for example Grossman, “Soldier,” “Beautiful,” and “Portrait.” I argue against Grossman’s conclusion in ch. 5, and show that soldiers are still promoted as figures of ideal citizenship in Israeli popular culture, albeit in more subtle ways. I follow Grossman’s thesis in marking the early 1970s as a turning point in the aesthetics of soldier-figures in popular visual culture.

¹⁵ For a historical analysis of the shift that took place in Israeli society regarding collective memory and national identity around the 1967 and 1973 wars see for example Ram, “National” and Segev, 1967. A similar thesis is offered in other exhibitions as well, for example in *Desert Cliché*, where curator Tami Katz-Freiman writes:

Since 1973 many sacred cows in Israeli society have been slaughtered, one by one.... The military myth, which for years served as the principal glue and the most resistant collective focal point, has also been undermined in various frameworks. (49)

has indeed ceased to be a taboo subject, and has gradually opened up for public scrutiny as well as academic investigation (Rosenhek, Maman, and Ben-Ari 477). Contemporary Israel is the site of intense debates about many of the fundamental assumptions of the Jewish nation-state, including the centrality of the military to definitions of Israeli-ness.¹⁶ Specifically, the social sciences show significant growth in the number and scope of publications on the issue. Some of these studies are devoted to rewriting historical narratives of war (Segev, *1949* and *1967*; Morris). Others rethink the function of the military within society and its part in structuring and maintaining, for example, repressive gender relations (Sasson-Levy, “Constructing,” *Identities in Uniform*) or class divisions (Levy, “Militaryizing,” *Different*). There are also sociological studies, on which the following analysis is based, that suggest that Israel has developed a specific kind of militarism, which continues to play a key role in its political, economic, and social arenas. They investigate, among other issues, how a culture so deeply infiltrated with militarism can fail to see itself as such. Prominent studies within this trend include the work of Shulamit Carmi, Henry Rosenfeld, Yagil Levy, Uri Ben-Eliezer, and Baruch Kimmerling.¹⁷ The latter focuses on the cultural aspect of militarism and his theorization of the elusive character of civilian militarism forms the base of my own argument.

According to Kimmerling, civilian militarism is hard to trace because it is not the formal, praetorian type of militarism, where the military forcibly takes over the ruling of the state, but is rather a grassroots cultural militarism, in which militaristic ways of thinking gradually penetrate the consciousness of the collective.¹⁸ The strength of the armed forces originates in this case in a militarized society, which favors power-oriented solutions. The collective’s nature is not perceived as militaristic even though (or perhaps, precisely because) the military institution, and the culture interwoven with it, have a decisive role in the formation of what being Israeli is all about. He explains:

¹⁶ See Rosenhek, Maman, and Ben-Ari and Maman, Ben-Ari, and Rosenhek (especially the introduction), for an overview of the study of “things military” in Israeli academia. Within the humanities, existing studies include Gluzman, Yosef, Lubin, Brownfield-Stein, and Barkai.

¹⁷ See Peri, “Radical” for a critical overview of these studies.

¹⁸ For a short summary of this argument see Feige. Uri Ben-Eliezer analyses Israeli society according to both praetorian and civilian forms of militarism in his book *The Making of Israeli Militarism* (1998).

[Civilian militarism] suffuses both the structural and cultural state of mind of the collectivity. This situation is liable to be reflected by full or partial institutional or cultural expressions; yet the main expression is a *latent state-of-mind*... Preparation [for war] becomes part of the social routine; it is far from being an issue for public discussion, debates or political struggle. (“Patterns” 206, emphasis in text)¹⁹

In other words, Kimmerling argues that Israeli militarism remained largely unrecognized both by scholars and by the general public because its principles *frame* the collective national consciousness and its norms of conduct. As a result, key aspects of civilian militarism, such as the normalization of war, are dissociated from the military apparatus at the same time as the military is embedded in the nation’s social framework through interactions with the education system, the juridical system, and the entertainment business, which all play crucial roles in shaping Israel’s militaristic meta-culture (“Militarism” 135; *Invention* 211–12). The sociopolitical boundaries of the collective are determined and maintained by participation in, or at least the support of, military service (“Militarism” 128; *Invention* 215). Even peace movements are instrumental for the perpetuation of civilian militarism, as they often reiterate militaristic values through their actions and statements (Kimmerling, “Patterns” 219).

Following studies as well as other non-academic social initiatives elaborate on the seemingly contradictory fact that, while the military institution today is scrutinized more than ever, it is still a most trusted establishment (Arian et al. 18–19, 88, 95). The “explosion of cultural critiques, polemical essays, and more ordered academic treatises about the place of war and the military in Israel” (Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 1) has not changed the fact that the military ethos today remains pervasive in the education system, in the socialization of youth, and in the construction of national and gender identities, as well as in economy and politics. In tandem, many cultural

¹⁹The Hebrew version of the article makes an even stronger statement:

This is an all-encompassing militarism, or at least encompassing the central fractions of the collective.... Inwards, the army constitutes a symbol and a myth that has direct consequences on setting the rules of the game and the boundaries of the collective. (Kimmerling, “Militarism” 128; my translation)

produces are saturated with military imagery, and the combat soldier–figure remains for the Jewish-Israeli collective a symbol of ideal citizenship, an apolitical hero.²⁰

When we take civilian militarism to be the frame through which the discourse on all things military – critical or not – takes place, the seemingly critical stance of the art world to which the exhibition *Uniform Ltd.* points is put in a different perspective. Reading *Uniform Ltd.* through civilian militarism underscores the difficulty I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: the difficulty of reflecting on the social framework within which one is embedded. This difficulty is related to what Butler terms “the paradox of subjectivation,” in which the subject who resists the norm is also enabled and produced by it (*Bodies* 15).²¹ It is echoed in Kimmerling’s view that many forms of discourse on the military, even when they go against the grain, ultimately fortify the position of the army as the organizing principle of social debate (*Invention* 223–26). The exhibition curators claim in the catalogue texts that the diverse approaches to the soldier are part of a wave of critique of the mythical place that the army now no longer enjoys (Maor, “Color” 110–109; Antebi and Dahari 99–97). Yet the abundance of military themes in artworks and exhibitions (as well as in film, theatre, and other cultural productions) also inevitably mirrors the preeminent place that the army still holds within contemporary Israeli culture. The demystification of the soldier-figure and the military apparatus might be part of the demilitarization of Israeli society, but it might also result in their further corroboration as vital cultural emblems.

In a colloquium devoted to “The Manly World View” in 1991, more than a decade prior to *Uniform Ltd.*, art critic Dalia Manor voiced this concern and criticized the customary interpretations of artistic soldier-representations as critical. Manor suggested that the change in the status of the soldier-figure from hero to anti-hero in the art world in fact helps to uphold the soldier’s mythical status: precisely because contemporary Israeli society is more critical towards its army, the image of the soldier

²⁰ While the growing awareness and ongoing specification of instances of civilian militarism have not had an effect on its pervasiveness, they have helped to outline the mechanisms with which military service is taken as a legitimate, normal, and highly evaluated arena for matters that have nothing to do with the military proper.

²¹ Butler distinguishes the resisting subject, who is part of the intelligible domain, from the “excluded and illegible domain that haunts the former domain as the specter of its own impossibility” (*Bodies* xi). The paradox of subjectivation, where the subject is always already part of the domain of intelligibility and is therefore limited in her ability to undermine it, does not negate the possibility of agency, but simply locates agency as something immanent to power, rather than external to it (*Bodies* xi, 15).

had to go through radical changes in order to maintain its position as marker of Israeli-ness. Manor concluded that the apparent breakdown of the figure runs counter to its avowed goal, and returns the soldier, now purged, to society's center (in Mishori 12–13). This wary approach remains a single minority voice in the historiography of Israeli art, and is not to be found in the texts of the *Uniform Ltd.* catalogue.

Taking Sides

The catalogue texts narrate the artistic fragmentation of the soldier-figure as a result of a process of individualization in society that led to a break with the consensus over all things military. This interpretation corresponds to the way in which the curators of *Uniform Ltd.* understand the role of art in society as somewhat passive, where exhibitions follow artworks, and artworks mirror reality. This reality, in turn, remains almost untouched. A typical example reads:

Art gives expression to the current reality, and when reality is multi-faceted and confusing, art too evades unequivocal stylistic definitions and is revealed in its diverse expression. (Antebi and Dahary 97)

This telling statement suggests that even the formal qualities of artworks are subordinate to a social or political atmosphere. Art, here as well as in other instances in the catalogue, is framed as a secondary, limited agent in the social field, and curatorial knowledge is understood as distant and somewhat ineffective (e.g., Maor, “Color” 108; Antebi and Dahary 94, 97). However, at the same time, the texts maintain, “art tries, with its limited power, to look out and mirror, perhaps even outline a path and point at another, possible alternative reality” (Maor, “Color” 106). The artist's role is to observe reality, even when it is disconcerting, and art's social agency lies in a kind of domino effect, as it reveals those critical observations to its viewers (Antebi and Dahary 94; Maor, “Color” 106). Dramatic in their claims for the artist's role, yet humble in their assessment of the social agency of art, the texts do not, cannot, address the challenge posed by the framework of civilian militarism, in

which any redistribution of the soldier-figure, however critical, might simultaneously reinforce a militaristic visual field.²²

One confessional fragment in the afterword to the third catalogue text forms a suggestive exception. It reads:

The representation of soldiers in Israeli art is a sensitive theme replete with pitfalls. Awareness of this sensitivity has guided us throughout the preparation of the exhibition and catalogue, in an attempt to present the artists' work and the worldviews emerging from them professionally and accurately, and to give expression to the range of opinions and statements. (Antebi and Dahary 94)

The curators' avowed preference to remain objective and descriptive ("professional and accurate") and to steer clear of an exploration that goes beyond the intentions ("opinions and statements") of the artists corresponds to how they understand their own role, as outlined above; yet to my mind it clashes with the topic of the exhibition. If the theme of soldier representations is indeed "replete with pitfalls" I would argue that it requires a thorough examination of the trouble that it stirs up, rather than a tiptoed evasion. This enigmatic indication of pitfalls, when left underdeveloped, turns into a sort of pitfall in itself, a pink elephant that undermines the texts' stated intention.

Yet, things do not end here. While the catalogue texts position *Uniform Ltd.* as an objective presentation of a current tendency in the art world, the relations between colors, shapes, and words on the catalogue cover bring up a more subjective set of questions with regards to the relation between artworks and exhibitions, as well as to civilian militarism. It lays bare additional (and more dialogical) layers of meaning that precede and structure the exhibition's approach to the military aspects of Israeli culture. As a sort of fourth introductory text, the catalogue cover, as a visual essay, frames the exhibition in a more intricate relation with the artworks that it hosts as well as with the catalogue's readers and exhibition visitors.

²² I do not wholly disagree with the way in which art's agency is portrayed in the texts, but I wish to draw attention to the lack of reflection on art's potential complicity with power, a lack that is rectified by the catalogue cover.

The catalogue of *Uniform Ltd.* is bilingual, written in Hebrew and English. Since both sides of the catalogue are front covers, leading to either the Hebrew or the English sections, they look identical except for their language fonts.²³ At the center of each side are two duplicates of a numbered black-and-white photograph, featuring the bust of young man who smiles broadly. The duplicate on the right, however, is damaged, and a circular perforation in the shape of a cigarette burn wipes out most of the photographed lower face and neck (figures 1.1, 1.2). The photographs are quotations from the installation *Self Portrait in the IDF induction Centre* by Dudu Bareket, composed of a self-made slide projector, slides, and explanatory text.²⁴ The text invites the audience to insert slides of Bareket's soldier identification photo into the projector, which burns through them by overexposure while projecting them on the wall. In the installation, each burnt slide falls on the floor onto a pile of previously destroyed portraits of the smiling youth (figure 1.3).

On the catalogue cover, however, the slide reproductions are part of an entirely different composition. First, they look like two recurrent images of passport photographs, one whole, the other burnt. Second, they are displayed on top of an ornamented olive-green background, which is composed of small, tightly packed repetitions of the Israeli army seal: a circle that surrounds the letter "Tzadi" (צ), the first letter of the word "army" in Hebrew, and the first letter of the abbreviation "IDF" (Israeli Defense Forces). Third, the photographs are surrounded by many more logos and signs: the logo and name of Ben-Gurion University is displayed in bright yellow above the photos; a bigger version of the army seal, also in bright yellow, is stamped on the lower corner of one of the passport photos, echoing the yellow borders of the burned perforation; and the title of the exhibition appears under the photos in black and white. Through the appropriation of an existing image from an artwork, and through its positioning in the midst of various other signs of social sanction and authority, the catalogue cover comments on the way in which social and artistic norms are configured.

²³ The only additional variation between the Hebrew and English booklet covers is the position of the yellow army stamp, which appears on the left of the Hebrew title, and on the right of the English one.

²⁴ The installation was first shown as part of the exhibition *Fire Zone 1* (curator: Tali Tamir), Ha'Kibbutz Gallery, Tel Aviv, in 2002.



Figure 1.3 Dudu Bareket, *Self Portrait at the IDF Induction Centre*, 2002. Gallery view.

The citing of Bareket's installation on the cover takes on a more participatory role than the introductory texts assume for the exhibition. It creates a new image that does not exist independently, and so is not a reproduction, but becomes a representation of Bareket's installation and of the exhibition as a whole. Since many of the works exhibited are either photographs or paintings, the choice to produce a new image on the cover indicates the exhibition's agency. It presents the relation between the exhibition and the artworks as dialogic instead of descriptive, objective, or subservient. This aspect is enhanced by the fact that signs that belong to "art" and to "society" respectively are intermingled on the cover, rather than categorically separated, and that the soldier-figure is addressed by both at once. Stamps of the army, the state, and the academy are placed on top of, but also within and behind, Bareket's double portrait. The latter, in turn, indexes both the "real" soldier that was photographed at the induction center and the "represented" soldier that is found on the slides that are part of the art installation. Thus, while the catalogue texts strain to remain descriptive and objective, to stay "outside" the work and to offer only contextual background for the exhibition, the catalogue cover draws attention to its own status as parergon and to its active participation in the way the artworks of *Uniform Ltd.* are framed and perceived. If, as I have argued above, an awareness of the act of framing calls for the accountability of its performing agents (Bal, *Travelling* 135), then the catalogue cover invites its viewers to reflect on the determining aspects of the frames within which the soldier figure is represented in this exhibition in particular and in Israeli art and culture more generally.

Framing Representation

I propose to read the catalogue cover of *Uniform Ltd.* as a visual variant of Judith Butler's theory of performative reiterations in the specific context of Israeli civilian militarism. In her book *Bodies that Matter* Butler conceptualizes performativity as the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration (20). The term was first coined by the philosopher of language J. L. Austin to designate an utterance that "does" what it "says." Austin assigns the successful execution of the performative utterance to the social circumstances in which it is uttered and to the authority of its speaker, but Butler follows Derrida when she underscores the importance of repetition

(or, in Derrida's terms, iterability) for the production of performative effects (*Bodies* 12–16).²⁵ She describes a cyclic process of socialization: one becomes a subject through repeated acts that depend on social conventions, and by way of repeating these acts, one fortifies their status as authoritative social conventions. The performative is thus never an empowered singular act, and its ability to “do” what it “says,” to have a determining effect on its surrounding, is based on prior instances (15).

Butler does not attend often to the visual in her writing, and the bulk of her work on the performative regards the bodily, temporal reiterations of societal norms. Yet, Butler offers her work up for appropriation when she writes that “the unanticipated reappropriations of a given work in areas for which it was never consciously intended are some of the most useful” (*Bodies* 19). The translation, or better yet, reiteration of her thought into the visual and the national domain is thus not entirely uncalled for.²⁶ The plural and repeated signs of state authority do not leave space to consider the subject in the photographs as independent from these enclosing frames, and the serial number that accompanies the image reaffirms the institutionalized position of the captured face. The body that emerges, that smiling torso of a young recruit, is formed by and framed within authorization codes, and receives legibility through various institutional signs. This portrait is embedded in a system of authoritative meaning production, and its subject seems quite happy to be there, smiling broadly to the camera.

The interaction between the different signs on the cover is also noteworthy. The bigger yellow army stamp derives its authority – its visual potency – from its many citations in the background. Its visual similarity to the yellow university logo suggests that supposedly independent state institutions may work in similar ways in constructing the subject. Thus, the subject on the catalogue cover, a representative of other representations of soldiers, emerges

²⁵ In theorizing the performative, Jacques Derrida stresses that meaning is produced through the accumulation of recurrent and varied performances in time rather than from an autonomous language structure, as Austin has suggested (Austin 179–82). Butler continues this line of thought when she stressed that the authority of an utterance lies with accumulative repetitions of the norm. Her contribution to performative theory lies in its extensions beyond speech-acts to the realm of gender and bodily, non-spoken gestures as well. See Culler, “Philosophy,” for a clear account of the fortunes of the performative in literary theory, philosophy, and gender studies.

²⁶ The notion of visual art as a performative speech-act was first developed by Bal in *Double Exposures* (1996). See also Bal's introduction to *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* (1999).

from both militarized and non-militarized institutional domains, which together relay countless reverberations of the military's authoritative approval.

The subject of *Uniform Ltd.*, then, is molded into vision by the multiple repetitions of institutional signs. However, his visibility comes at a price. The dialogue between the larger version of the army stamp and the yellow edges of the perforation in the damaged photograph suggests that the army *burns* the subject whom it approves and defines. The burn, caused by overexposure of the slide photograph to light, is thus analogous to the overdetermination of the subject by the army stamps. It exposes the detrimental aspect of the process, a point pushed further by the thick black frame that surrounds the portraits, which cites the format of an obituary notice.²⁷ The eager smile of the subject does not waver and is still visible under the burnt perforation, reiterating a gesture of satisfaction and pride. The pain connoted by the burn seems to stem, then, not from the subject himself (who remains the same, smiling), but from the repetition of displaying the image, from the overexposure of the image not only to light but also to the eyes of the viewer; indeed, from the strain of maintaining that smile again and again. The dual reproductions of the photograph, one whole and the other burnt, focus the viewer's attention on the void between the one repetition and the other, and expose the mechanism (and the price) of reiteration that is at the base of performative identity.²⁸

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the background of the cover reflects on the situation of the spectator as well. It intimates that viewers are already surrounded by a militarized visual field when they enter the field of artistic representations of soldiers. The declared critical approach of the art world is based here on army stamps, which together produce the very ground for the visibility of the image, even as they simultaneously disturb it by overexposure. And yet, while the army seals effectively cover and envelop the entire field of vision, while they direct our vision, they become almost invisible as they amalgamate into a smooth color. It is all too easy to overlook the military pattern on the catalogue cover, and that is precisely the point.

²⁷ Alternatively, the portrait can be interpreted through its resemblance to a mugshot, and from this perspective, shown to hint at the "frame-up" aspect of the exhibition that is developed in Bal, *Travelling*.

²⁸ The installation itself pushes the point further by staging a cyclic, endless process of exposure and destruction, as well as by turning the audience into accomplices who take active part in the process of overexposure.

Cultural theorist Ruti Kantor suggests that “our exposure to visual militaristic messages is acute and intensive, even when it is incidental or unintentional” (44–45). My reading of the catalogue cover suggests that the militaristic message is intensive *especially* when it is incidental: the effect of the army stamps in/as the background of the catalogue cover is all the more potent because of its subtlety. Here, again, Butler’s theory proves most useful. For Butler, repetition is a method of disguise. Every performative act conceals the conventions of which it is a repetition, and naturalizes, in retrospect, all the previous ones. In extreme cases,

certain reiterative chains of discursive production are barely legible as reiterations, for the effects they have materialized are those without which no bearing in discourse can be taken. *The power of discourse to materialize its effects is thus consonant with the power of discourse to circumscribe the domain of intelligibility.* (*Bodies* 188; emphasis added)

This view of the power of concealed conventions resonates with Kimmerling’s account of civilian militarism in Israeli society. He argues that civilian militarism is hard to perceive because it is an all-encompassing social frame on which Israeli collective consciousness is based (“Militarism” 128; “Patterns” 206). Butler explains how the combination of imperceptibility and influence comes about: through constant repetitions that simultaneously naturalize past events and pass as unquestioned norms in the present. The divergent militaristic discursive and visual acts that are everywhere to be found in Israeli civil society and culture do not merely cite the norm of civilian militarism, but are in themselves the tools for its maintenance, as well as for its disguise.

The stamps’ repetition is a method of disguise, and if the power of discourse to materialize its effects corresponds to the power of discourse to circumscribe intelligibility (Butler, *Bodies* 188), this disguise is itself the means to paint the domain of visibility in khaki colors. The cover thus operates as a visual metaphor for Kimmerling’s theory, in which the signs of civilian militarism fade away and become the naturalized background of social life. While officially introducing “representations of soldiers,” the catalogue cover in fact allows for the concept of civilian militarism to gain momentary legibility over the military subjects that are its manifestation. By underscoring the

frameworks that construe *Uniform Ltd.*, the cover reiterates a social performative in such a way that it allows it to be exposed momentarily, offering room for doubt at the threshold to a space of critical representations.

Critical Frictions

Kimmerling's thesis paints a pessimistic picture with regards to the possibility of the demilitarization of Israeli society. His account of civilian militarism suggests that almost every form of discourse on the military, however critical, fortifies the position of the army. The military engulfs everything: left- and right-wing arguments, pro- and anti-war actions, critical and non-critical studies of the military, critical and non-critical images of soldiers. Kimmerling offers the example of the organization Peace Now. He shows how it flaunted the military rank and expertise of its members in order to gain social legitimacy for its demand, unpopular at the time, to retreat from Lebanese territory in the 1980s (*Invention* 224–25). For instance, during the movement's nascence in 1978, only men who served in combatant roles were invited to sign public petitions, and for many years after, the movement's rhetoric was often formulated in militaristic terms, even when calling for the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Feige 94; Kimmerling, *Invention* 224). When militaristic attitudes form the ground on which debates occur in the first place – forming, in Butler's terms, a *constitutive constraint* on the subject – they can hardly be challenged in and of themselves.

A way out of this deadlock was offered by sociologist Michael Feige, who suggests that civilian militarism contains an inherent self-destructive quality, which may lead to its eventual demise. Feige returns to Kimmerling's analysis of Peace Now and argues that, while civilian militarism was indeed omnipresent in the group's initial activities, it was minimized in time through a process that Feige sees as inevitable. The process that Feige outlines, of gradual and minor transformations which eventually lead to policy change, resonates with Butler's view on the agency that resides in performative reiterations. That agency is limited in the sense that it does not reside in a voluntary subject, but is there nevertheless in the form of a "rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (*Bodies* 15).

Repetitions, Butler argues, are not only the mechanisms of authoritative subjectivation. They also hold a political promise, as they constitute the occasion for a critical reworking of norms. The process of reiteration is indispensable for the maintenance of the regulatory law, and consequently, the law remains to some extent dependent on its reiterations and is always susceptible to re-articulations. This susceptibility, then, is a constitutive weakness of the performative, not an incidental misfortune (*Bodies* 21–22, 122). Butler explains:

That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (*Bodies* 2)

But how does this relate to *Uniform Ltd.* in general, and to the catalogue cover in particular? In the previous section, I argued that the cover could be interpreted as a visual metaphor for civilian militarism, in its presentation of a variety of visual repetitions, which reiterate Butler’s understanding of performativity. Now, I focus on the titles of the exhibition as another, more manifest non-identical repetition that allows further contemplation on the perception of soldier representations in Israeli art. Both titles occupy a supposedly singular position, that of the main title of the exhibition, and they echo each other in their location and design on the two sides of the catalogue cover, which are otherwise practically identical. Yet *Ata Totach!*, the Hebrew title, literally translates as “You’re a Cannon!” and frames the exhibition in a very different manner than the English *Uniform Ltd.* This friction allows me to further theorize issues of visual performativity and of subjective critique.

The English version refers to the world of commerce. The abbreviation “Ltd.” is applied to capitalist companies, and so the title *Uniform Ltd.* alludes to the army as a profitable business. The critique implicated in the English title is elaborated (in Hebrew and English) in the first introductory text, in which curator Haim Maor narrates a transformation in the IDF’s position from “a

people's army" into a workplace that segregates different social groups. Maor explains:

In recent years one feels that different hues (political, sectorial, professional, image-related) have tinted the khaki colors that characterized the army in its nascence. These shades have transformed the uniform's uniform colors into variegated camouflage colors that conceal more than they reveal. The uniform has transformed from national to commercial, to *Uniform Ltd.* (Maor, "Color" 110)

In other words, the military uniform that used to symbolize transparency and equality has changed in function, and now hides social inequality behind a standardized khaki outfit.²⁹ The army seals that form the background of the catalogue cover can be interpreted accordingly as an attempt to cover up the demise in the status of the Israeli army, or as the manufacturing of military symbols on an assembly line. In both cases, the title *Uniform Ltd.* is directed at the meta-structure of the Israeli army, and to its relationship with civilian capitalist society.

The Hebrew title, in contrast, approaches the topic from the perspective of the subject and comments on the relation between gender and the military. To fully understand its various connotations, some background involving Israeli popular culture is called for. The idiom "you're a cannon" is the Hebrew equivalent of the English "you're a stud," referring to an attractive and successful man. Significantly, the Hebrew version employs the military image of the cannon for its macho figure, rather than the animalistic image of the stallion. Maor touches upon this issue and describes military service as a "unique Israeli rite of passage," linked with youthful eroticism and the formation of a sexual identity.³⁰ When masculinity is measured through one's military identity, as it often is in Israel, it is not surprising that the image of

²⁹ Maor's argument is based on Yagil Levy's groundbreaking work, *A Different Army for Israel: Materialistic Militarism in Israel* (2003). In his book Levy pushes the argument further, and maintains that the army has never been a people's army and has always favored certain social groups over others.

³⁰ In this case, too, Maor notices a transformation, but a positive one: an opening-up to new sensitivities, manifested in a range of non-masochistic artistic depictions of the Israeli soldier ("Color" 108).

manhood is militarized, and that idioms such as “you’re a cannon!” conceive of the phallus as a weapon.³¹

“You’re a Cannon” was also the name of another art exhibition, presented in 1997, and fully titled *You’re a Cannon: Icons of Masculinity* (curators: The Limbus Group, Limbus Gallery, Ramat-Hasharon). This exhibition attempted to “observe the changes and the undermining of collective, stereotypical, and characteristic images of Israeli masculinity, which shape the identity of the ‘Israeli man’” (Sasson-Levy, *Identities in Uniform* 192, my translation). Some artworks were exhibited in both “cannon” exhibitions, and it is telling that the same title and some of the same artworks were used to reflect upon Israeli masculinity on one occasion and upon the image of the Israeli soldier in another.

Finally, “You’re a Cannon” is the title of a hit song by the Israeli pop star Sarit Hadad in 2002. The lyrics of the refrain translate as follows: “You are a cannon / there is no one like you / I will die for you / you are the greatest.”³² The words pronounce utter admiration for the macho man, and reiterate the canonical perception of cannons as signs for triumphant masculinity. In fact, Hadad’s catchy song has little to do with military heroism as such. Dedicated to her manager, it tells the story of her discovery: how he found her, promised her a dream, and made that dream happen. As in other aspects of civilian militarism, this militarized version of masculinity passes unnoticed and functions here without much awareness of it.

In its citation of a colloquial expression, a hit song, and a previous art exhibition, the Hebrew title *You’re a Cannon!* locates its referent within Israeli culture, street language, and art scene. It intimates that the artworks included in the exhibition comment on a military ideal from an engaged position, from the center of the culture. In contrast, the English *Uniform Ltd.* zooms out and turns critical focus towards the historical change in the army’s position, from an ideal figure of national consensus to a fragmented industrial apparatus. The English framing is sophisticated and somewhat detached, promising an overview of the changes in the social value of soldier imagery. The Hebrew framing is popular and engaged, stemming from the folksy center. The tension between the two is enhanced through their syntax. *Uniform*

³¹ The relation between masculinity and militarism in Israel will be the focus of the following chapter. For sociological studies of the phenomenon see for example Klein, “Gender,” and Sasson-Levy, *Identities in Uniform*.

³² This translation is taken from Sarit Hadad’s official Internet forum, at <http://sarithadad.19.forumer.com>.

Ltd. follows the viewers' gaze inward, into the booklet's content, without including their subjectivity in the matrix of militarized culture. *You're a Cannon!*, however, directly addresses the viewers. It makes them a part of the picture, so to speak, and effectively masculinizes them, given that the word "you" is spelled in its masculine form.

The frictions between the titles cancel out the possibility of a comprehensive analysis, as each title frames the exhibition differently. Take, for example, the four sub-themes of the exhibition: "Field Artist," "Puppet Soldier," "Mother's Voice," and "The Sensitive Gender-less Soldier." When examined through the prism of the English heading, these headings emphasize the fragmentation of the uniform into disparate elements and voices. When examined through the prism of the Hebrew heading, their gendered and cultural aspects come to the fore.³³ The subtitles frame the cover image in different ways: the Hebrew title associates the burned perforation in Bareket's portrait with a cannon ball, and the statement "you're a cannon!" seems then to collide with the subject's face. In the English title, the perforation is more readily connected with a cigarette burn, and the association is that of a bureaucratic office where objects get accidentally damaged.

Because the same image is associated with each version of the title separately, on opposing sides of the cover, the friction I have traced becomes apparent only when the viewer flips the booklet around. The double heading mirrors its dissimilarity in the process, and subsequently emphasizes the multiple framing possibilities for a single image or theme. It is not simply the case that one title is located inside the militarized point of view and the other resides outside of this frame. As demonstrated on the catalogue cover, both statements, "You're a Cannon!" and "Uniform Ltd." are equally set against a militarized background. However, they contend differently with their position, and thus allow viewers to flip between perspectives and consider the variability of visual, textual, and social representations.

The multiple tensions delineated in this chapter – between the catalogue texts' overt intentions and performative results, the repetitions on the catalogue cover, and the incongruities of its disparate titles – negate a unified account of the exhibition that the catalogue is meant to introduce. They reveal, through

³³ The subheadings' gendered aspect is most evident in "mother's voice" and "the gender-less soldier," but it also resides in the Hebrew translation of "puppet soldier" and "field artist" because, in Hebrew, all nouns are gendered.

symptomatic signs and symbols, the predicaments inherent to the critical use of militarized themes within the context of a militarized society, and point to the difficulty of critically reflecting on the social framework in which one is embedded. At the same time, they introduce a tentative solution to the constitutive constraint of embedded critique, and suggest that dwelling on incongruities and frictions is a way to broaden one's perspective, acknowledge one's complicity, and allow for hesitation, multiplicity, doubt, and reflexivity to inflect one's vision.

If our inability to see what we see is indeed of critical concern (Butler, "Photography" 826), then it does not suffice to make something visible or comprehensible through representation. Rather, we must turn our focus towards the frame, the parergon that forms and informs our vision on visual, conceptual, and ideological levels. In following chapters I search for those incongruities that turn the military-related content of artworks inside out and that, in their disruption of cohesive compositions, clear-cut definitions, or consistent histories, allow me to foreground the frames that construct their meaning within Israel's contemporary culture of civilian militarism.