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Shifting sights: civilian militarism in Israeli art and visual culture

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AFTERWORD

When you walk out of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, with your back turned to the entrance hall displaying the price list that welcomed you at the opening of this study, you find yourself in the museum square, a wide, open space. Henry Moore's *Reclining Figure* (1969–70), Menashe Kadishman's *The Binding of Isaac* (1982–85), and Motti Mizrachi's *Icarus* (2002) are only a few of the sculptures that surround you. To your left, you can find the magistrate and district courts of Tel Aviv. To your right stands Beit Ariela, the city's central library. And in front of you, beyond the square and across the busy King Solomon Boulevard, stands "Ha-Kiryia," a large fenced area that contains a number of government structures, including the major IDF base hosting the IDF headquarters.

Whether you enter or exit the museum, military structures and signs are everywhere to be seen. Ha-Kiryia, once a Templar settlement, with its satellite towers and landing fields, is a well-known landmark of the city, and is always surrounded by swarms of young soldiers. So well known, in fact, that it would hardly grab your attention. Crossing the street to catch a bus, you might come across a banner declaring, "A true Israeli does not dodge military service"; if you came by private transport, you might listen to "IDF radio" on your way home, and when arriving home, you would hear a military expert commenting on today's events on one of the evening talk shows on TV. It is impossible to escape the presence of the military in Israel, and it is exhausting to take note of every one of its ephemeral and mundane manifestations. In this study I hope to have unpacked the way in which art and visual culture contend, not with the military itself, but with its foundational impact on Israeli identity, culture, and society: its influence on bodily images and national affiliations; its impression on landscape; its authority as an coercive glue that encompasses collective memories; and, most importantly, the acceptance of those numerous militarized aspects and elements as unproblematic parts of civilian life.

Analyses of the social, psychological, and political effects of military pervasiveness within civilian life are left to other studies. My concern was with the way that the naturalization of civilian militarism – in other words, the effacement of a military frame of mind – both subsists within and is jeopardized by Israeli visual culture. The necessary conclusion from the facets of civilian militarism outlined in this study is that the struggle for the de-militarization of Israeli society (or, as the

feminist organization New Profile puts it, the struggle for its civil-ization) must also take place visually. We must learn to see surroundings differently, so we can discern the manifestations of civilian militarism and give shape to the phenomenon itself, which remains powerful due to its ungraspable essence as what guides vision but remains, precisely for that reason, out of sight.

Yet, I maintain a doubting stance toward the epistemological and political promise of merely making something visible: the promise of an ideal image that could reveal the aspects of reality that are hidden in plain sight. That is why my search for the codes of civilian militarism focused on images that offer reflections on – rather than solutions to – the complicitous ways of seeing and knowing that enable civilian militarism. The insistence on art as the place where a nuanced, wary, and skeptical awareness may reside is based on my understanding of artworks as theoretical objects that offer an articulation of the ideals, values, and presuppositions we live by (Van Alphen, *Art* 9; Bleeker, *Visuality* 18).

In a study about works of art that reflect (on) issues of contemporary society, the question of “political art,” or the relationship between politics and aesthetics, is pertinent. While I address this question directly only in chapter six, analyzing the *Fence Art* exhibition through Jacques Rancière’s work, my view of this relationship is embedded in and developed through the rest of the chapters as well. To bring my argument to a close, I wish to offer some remarks on the way the critical artwork is conceptualized in this study. In what follows I briefly reflect on the related (and interrelated) aspects of critical art that my chapters have brought to the fore.

The first aspect is perhaps the most crucial. The works I engage with make a statement about the world, and in so doing, transgress the artwork’s frame as the cut between aesthetic images and political realities. Yet they simultaneously take their own place in that world into account. They thus mark the relation between politics and art as a relation of exchange, not of negation or subordination. Dudu Bareket’s *Self Portrait in the IDF Induction Centre*, introduced in chapter one, makes a case for such a convivial relationship between the domains of “art” and “politics.” Its title refers both to the complex art-historical tradition of (self-) portraiture and to a significant moment, a rite of passage, in an Israeli youth’s development. The installation’s engagement with societal norms is enacted through a questioning of the mechanisms of visibility and the relationship between artist, artwork, and art consumer: Bareket’s militarized portrait is multiplied on projector slides and put in

the hands of the viewers, for them to either protect or destroy. The act of making and exhibiting art is intertwined here with the act of molding a militarized, national subject in ways that complicate both rather than submit one to the other.

Exposing the politics of the aesthetic, the historiography of line and color, is thus intrinsic to the exposition of the work's socio-political content, which is then delineated in, by, and through those lines. This simultaneous focus points both inwards, to the work, and outwards, to the reality in which the work is made and on which the work wishes to comment, and can be found in many of the cases in this study. It may have been the trigger that drew me to those cases from the start: Adi Nes' actualization (and militarization) of masterpieces in his *Soldiers* series offers a self-conscious palimpsest of signification that conflates art history and social hierarchies; Larry Abramson's *tso'ob'ä* alludes to a lineage of landscape painting as integral part of its comment on a geo-political Zionist scopoc regime; the ways that Kuper and Ofir's *Necropolis* series undermines traditional modes of photography cannot be separated from the issues that it raises in relation to the landscape that is photographed. All these cases suggest that "political art" can avoid becoming political propaganda by questioning issues that subsist both within and outside the frame of "art." More poignant perhaps is their suggestion that the radical conflation of politics and aesthetics is a necessary means to avoid both political and aesthetic redundancy. Only when aesthetic and non-aesthetic matters become irreducible to each other while remaining inseparable do they provide the ground for critique. When that is the case, then "art [may 'work'] as art because it works politically" (Bal *Political 2*).

The critical artwork is not by definition better, or more morally sound, than any other. It is a type of image that has the potential to reflect on social issues aesthetically. The works in this study are part and parcel of the aesthetic and political systems that they comment on, and do not employ the frame of critique as a shield from acknowledging their – and their viewers' – participation in those systems. On the contrary, the moments of insight offered by the works allow complicity, limitation, and failure to come forth. This is the second aspect I would like to underscore here: the critical image, as it has emerged in this study, involves the acknowledgment and exposure of the work's participation in the very genres, traditions, and worldviews that it opposes.

One way that the works contend with complicity is directly related to civilian militarism, and lies in the way they address their viewers in military terms. Bareket's

“self-portrait” replaces the anonymous soldier who photographed him at the induction center with the museum visitor who projects his image on the wall. The portrait’s reproduction on the *Uniform Ltd.* catalogue cover is, in turn, surrounded, almost drowned in a sea of military seals. Similarly, the inscribed mirrors in the *Fence Art* exhibition correlate the soldiers that faced them in the village with gallery visitors, and the composition of David Goss’s *Lebanese Kebab* positions the viewer behind a gun sight and reflects on her location within the visual matrix of civilian militarism. In Meir Gal’s *Beit-Hanina/Pisgat Ze’ev*, the gallery visitor is addressed by the same militarized city street names that await her on the way home. All these works come together in their coloring of the field of vision in khaki-green. To that extent they reiterate most forcefully the social position that they call into question.

The destabilization of civilian militarism in these works occurs, then, not through its denunciation, but through a staging of simultaneous and irreconcilable modes of looking that disrupt civilian militarism’s authoritative claim. David Goss’s *Table Maps* series, discussed in chapter four, makes this point clear in the way it extends reservations on optics (what do we see, where do we see it from) to politics (what is our subject position, how does it determine our vision) as well as the domain of genres and categories (how should we begin to approach an image). The juxtaposition of multiple viewpoints takes shape differently in the various cases I have dealt with, yet the generally shared result is a shift in focus from the image itself to the dialogic relation between the image and its interpretations, or maybe, the image and its interpreters. One way to enact this destabilization is to focus simultaneously on the work’s political matter and aesthetic practice, as I have described above. Another way is to be found in the works’ engagement with their visual histories and traditions.

Those histories varied according to the particular cases examined, from representations of bodies to those of landscape, from the genre of still life to the medium of installation art. The intensity with which the contemporary artworks attempted to revise their respective traditions was also diverse. Yet, as a whole, a refusal emerged, a refusal to position a current point of view as a clear-cut remedy for a past wrong. The spaces that open between “present” and “past” images, for example in Nes’s palimpsest of references discussed in chapter two, or in Abramson’s *tso’ob’ü* discussed in chapter three, turn out to be central components in both series, which cast their shadows on the works on display as much as they do on the older, quoted references. The palimpsestic aspect of Nes’s *Soldiers* has often been interpreted in

terms that assert the series' moral superiority over the images that it preposterously deconstructs. Yet my counter-analysis, foregrounding the series' selective attention to militarized traditions of desire, is enabled by the same referential elements. In *tso'ob'ä*, that sort of critique is already embodied in the installation's aesthetic, which acknowledges the dependency on a lineage of painting tradition that is at the same time ruthlessly critiqued. Thus, on varying scales, the attention to history plays a part in the works' disclosure of complicity.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of *40 Years to Victory*, discussed in chapter five. Here, the renunciation of a "better present" is aimed exactly at those educated readings that understand the earlier postcards to be locked in an outdated frame of mind. The exhibition's radical celebration of complicity involves a double temporal destabilization. On the one hand, history is shaken up, framed as a part of the present inasmuch as it is exposed to be a contemporary act of memory. On the other hand, history is mobilized to critically capture a present that is otherwise in flux. The engagement with images whose meanings seem to be congealed in time not only opens up those past works for renewed interpretation, but also leads to a momentary arrest of the present and allows for reflection on the current state of affairs.

40 Years to Victory underscores an additional aspect of the awareness of complicity intrinsic to the critical image. It stresses that, in the process of self-indictment, the cultural analyst is not spared. In this work, as well as in others, no reading can place the reader outside the scope of civilian militarism; perhaps no reading should. The questions and doubts posed throughout this study are tackled from various angles but are not answered or solved. The resulting experience is affective rather than merely cognitive; it is closely linked with the labor of the critical image itself, as it negates the prospect of a morally, politically, or aesthetically correct alternative from which one could evaluate the field of vision. My dwelling on artworks that themselves dwell on the limitations of artistic and political vision comes from the apprehension that a "new and improved" position will end up including the same drawbacks, the same blindness to one's frame of mind. Thus, finally, the critical edge of the critical image, as it has been outlined in this study, lies not in an attempt to solve, but in an attempt to complicate, to shift understanding; to keep us viewers on our toes, always aware of the limitations of clearly delineated fields of knowledge and vision. Without losing sight of the political reality of civilian militarism, the project of visual de-militarization as it has been developed here effects a shifting of the gun

sight, a blurring of focused vision, an embrace of a receptive yet grounded approach that is resolute only in its insistence against resolutions.