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Shifting sights: civilian militarism in Israeli art and visual culture

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SUMMARY

This study investigates representations of the military subject in contemporary Israeli art and visual culture. More specifically, it looks into the ever-present and naturalized way in which militarism participates in Israeli art and visual culture. Militarism is understood here as a dynamic condition, characterized by the progressive expansion of the military sphere over the civilian. I analyze various artistic, curatorial and activist projects that either participate in, or comment on this phenomenon, in order to tease out the militarized frames that delimit Israeli social and political discourses. My interest lies in militarism as excess, and in the ability of visual art to articulate this excess to its audience. My point of departure is the assumption that art is a valuable partner in the production of critical discourse.

Chapter one, “Canons of Israeli Society,” serves as a preamble to the chapters that follow. It comprises of a close reading of an exhibition catalogue devoted to representations of soldiers in contemporary Israeli art. 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. Therefore, in this chapter, I inquire into the soldier’s prominent position in Israeli art, whether the figure is embraced or criticized. The focus on an exhibition catalogue, instead of on “proper” works of art, allows me to inquire how visual representations of soldiers are themselves represented, that is, how they are framed, perceived, and offered to the audience. In this chapter I also offer a historical survey of the study of “things military” in Israeli academia and introduce the sociological concept of “civilian militarism” as the framework for my analysis, 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.

Chapter two, “Bodies of the Nation: Eroticized Soldiers” contends with the embodiment of militarism through Adi Nes’ *Soldiers* series, which portrays the Israeli soldier as an erotic object of inquiry and critique. Nes’s oeuvre fleshes out the relationship between nationality, masculinity, and art history in a most direct, but also most problematic, way. I read Nes’s work against theories of sexuality, aesthetics, and nationalism to inquire how its rendering of the body of the soldier destabilizes, but also reinforces hegemonic masculinity and citizenship in their Israeli militarized

incarnation. The erotic portrayal of soldiers, I argue, cannot be interpreted only as a transgressive reference to Israeli hegemonic masculinity, but needs to be examined for its part in the consolidation of military-inflected national identities.

In chapter three, “Looking Through Landscape,” I turn to artworks by Larry Abramson, Meir Gal, Roi Kuper, and Gilad Ophir that attempt to challenge the apparatus of civilian militarism through the portrayal of landscape imagery. Their varied projects employ different aesthetic strategies to capture similar spaces marked by military residues. I read the works as attempts to transcend what Diana Dolev has termed “the stifling of the gaze,” referring to the way in which a vast spatial and geographical military presence goes mostly unnoticed. I analyze how the different artists attempt to visualize this epistemological blind-spot, and examine to what extent they reflect (on) the way in which military landscapes engulf the viewer within their frame. In so doing, I argue that landscape is a fitting medium for contemplating frames of vision and knowledge, and that, consequently, military landscapes hold the potential to theorize the elusiveness of civilian militarism.

Similar issues regarding the constructed essence of visual, spatial, and political knowledge arise in chapter four, “Kebab in Theory: Mapping Vision,” where I engage with the still life genre and the mapping view through a close reading of a single artwork, a modern Still Life painting entitled *Lebanese Kebab* by David Goss. Located between the discourses of art history, cartography, and political geography, *Lebanese Kebab* articulates the social imaginary of the Israeli subject. The contemplations it calls for are regressive and circular, as they return each time to question the foundation of perception. I focus on the challenges that the painting poses to interpretation as a way to clarify my understanding of the critical image, and introduce the notion of “productive failure” to argue that, when it comes to critical art, foregrounding the inability to capture a visual or conceptual phenomenon may generate a reflective process that sheds light on the naturalized and politically inflected truths, rooted at the base of perception and understanding.

Chapter five, “Greetings to the Soldier-Citizen: Consuming Nostalgia,” moves from landscape and mapping to memory. I look at the exhibition *40 Years to Victory* by Honi Hame’agel and investigate its staging of the relationship between militarism, visual culture, and national memory in present-day Israel. In this exhibition, there are no clear boundaries between what is past and what is present, what is remembered now and what was remembered then, and how these memories shape the bodies to

which they belong. I show how the exhibition's insertion of ostensibly dated militaristic imagery into the public sphere challenges conventional narratives of the transformation of Israeli identity through the years. Moreover, Hame'agel's exhibition allows me to elaborate further on the concept of productive failure, since it remains ideologically ambivalent, and so prevents an ethical relief on the part of the critic.

Finally, in chapter six, "Fence Art: Re/Framing Politics," I engage more directly with definitions of political art. I examine the performative aspect of the popular-resistance movement in the occupied Palestinian village of Bil'in, and look at how the movement takes up sculpture as part of its attempt to change the terms of engagement with the armed forces that police its demonstrations. Some of the sculptures from the early stages of Bil'in's struggle were later presented in a Tel Aviv gallery under the title *Fence Art*. Through juxtaposing the two events – demonstration and exhibition – I analyze the diverse roles that art may play in a political struggle. I conclude this study by considering the way in which it conceptualizes the critical image, and point to three interrelated aspects of critical art that the chapters have brought to the fore: a radical conflation of political matter and aesthetic practice, an acknowledgment and exposure of measures of complicity with the very genres or traditions that are put under scrutiny, and a staging of simultaneous and irreconcilable modes of looking that disrupt the authoritative claim of a singular point of view.

This study, then, attends to the relation between images and frames of vision in the contexts of militarized Israeli national identity and Israeli contemporary art. I unpack 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. The attention to a variety of artworks and art-related objects and events is meant to answer two separate sets of questions. One set belongs to the politics of visual culture, and questions the militarized aspect of its Israeli incarnation. The other belongs to the politics of visual art more generally, and examines its potential to expose and comment on its own construction. Both sets of questions start off from locating the power of images in the awakening of a contradictory desire to see what they actually cannot show (Mitchell, "Pictures"). This tendency of visual art to reflect on its own premises, limitations, and power structures, I argue, may lead

viewers to reappraise their modes of perception more generally. The critical image as it is outlined in this study, then, does not attempt to clarify confusions or to solve misunderstandings, but to complicate matters on aesthetic, social, cultural, and political levels alike.