

## Landscape with a Monument

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What was the burning motivation underlying Drora Dominey and France Lebéé-Nadav's decision to touch upon monuments? In Israel this subject matter is, on one hand, a taboo, and on the other – a red rag; any discussion deviating, in any way, from the tightly-set boundaries of convention can blow up in your face.

The group of photographs *Everyplace - Everywhere* jointly executed by these two artists addresses not the ostensibly visible - a monument in the landscape, but rather a significant nuance – namely, a landscape with a monument, and another landscape with a monument, and so on and so forth, the sequence itself cumulating into a journey. A quest documented over a period of two years, intended to encompass all the monument compounds scattered within the confines of the Green Line – altogether over a thousand, eventually cut down to a 180. A journey to where? What kind of story does it tell? What is the viewer's response to it? Is it identification? Or perhaps, an a-priori shunning and evasion, which eliminate all prospects of attention? Do the works indeed deconstruct clichés?

The photographs are all square in format, skirting the monumentalization inherent in the vertical format, and the association of landscape postcards evoked by the horizontal format. The gaze is frontal, at eye level, often from the back of the monument. There is never a magnification from a lower point of view, nor a close-up. The totality, the context, the landscape – these are the dominant elements: city, fallow land, wheat field, schoolyard, park, playground. Seldom is the sight as stirring as that of Balfuria: heavy clouds, wheat field, and on the horizon, in the distance, a small monument, so that by the composition's scale, the monument appears the same size as the random stone in the foreground. As a rule, the landscape is drama-free, ordinary, mundane-looking. The monument is assimilated, enveloped, enwrapped by the ambient configurations, and its centrality is always interrupted: palm trees, cypresses, utility poles, arrows on the road – all these expropriate its exclusiveness.

The monument's setting signifies a "ritualistic space" attesting to good intentions; celebrated artists were harnessed (Yehiel Shemi, Batya Lishansky) and amateur sculptors exerted themselves. All this is evident in the works, yet the objective is not documentation, but rather a photographic act: the affinity to the sight formed by a specific camera.

An array of values, sociological profiles, and taste preferences underlied the choice of sites to be photographed: There are modest monuments, dominant ones, delicate, kitschy, constructivist monuments made of concrete, and others masquerading as medieval castles; there are monuments of the IZL (National Military Organization) and those of the Haganah; and there is also an Egyptian obelisk; there are manifestations of the old *Yishuv* and those of recovered communities. A pluralism reflecting reality, the outcome of concrete observation rather than abstract survey: acquaintance with the field and awareness of its transformations, a work process resulting in reconciliation and acceptance; but, dare I say, acceptance on condition – the condition being the legitimization demanded by the anti-phallic, pathos-free eye and the gaze that shuns the strong Israeli light. Indeed, the surface gray is an intentional sign.

This is but half the journey. The reluctance to isolate the monument from its surroundings and the obsession with which the landscape is incorporated provide a plot for yet another chapter, that may be recounted through the acute, unreconciled, non-romantic analysis provided by W. J. T. Mitchell and other scholars, who traced the evasive affinity between seemingly naive landscape images and power. "Landscape," says Mitchell, "is not a genre of art but a medium. Landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other. As such, it is like money: good for nothing in itself, but expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of value. Like money, landscape is a social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value. It does so by naturalizing its conventions and conventionalizing its nature. Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. [...] Landscape is a medium found in all cultures." (W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, University of Chicago, 1994, p. 5).

Thus, the secularization and assimilation of landscape with a monument in these works are not only a defiance against a culture that glorifies monuments, but also an indication of the tendentious naturalization of that very same glorification, which is covert yet present in our daily life. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the photographs present the landscape as a territory, signifying its price via the monument. The monuments return a gaze – eye to eye, names versus viewer. The land was “purchased” at best for the prosaic purpose of subsistence; it was not sacred to begin with. The works, first and foremost, behold the dead, not the monument. Two women’s non-coincidental gaze.

The book *Gal-Ed* (*Monument*) (1989, Ministry of Defense Publishing House), which Dominey and Lebée-Nadav used as a reference, is a catalogue, a database, a description. However, “depicting,” according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “is not speaking for”; the *Everyplace - Everywhere* photographs, on the other hand, are just that - a non-neutral archive. Another important source of information, that may have also enhanced their orientation, was the research conducted by Dr. Esther Levinger from Haifa University in the early 1990s, *War Memorials in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 1993).

This harsh ‘stocktaking’ is performed in the photographs not in a militant manner, but rather with much subtlety and sensitivity. And since it is a burning matter of the present, the tone is very grave. Unlike Lee Friedlander’s 1970s monument photographs, an avowed precedent for the *Everyplace - Everywhere* images, the landscape shadows here do not efface the sight of the monument through an ironic allusion, and the electric wires do not defy nor cut through it. Likewise, there is no inkling here of the ridicule inherent in Mark Wallinger’s small-scale sculpture of the injured, meek figure, mounted on a permanent tall marble plinth at Trafalgar Square in 1999 for a period of six months, thus dwarfing the heroic trumpet call of the monuments towering by its side. Nor is there a trace here of Jorge Luis Borges’ iconoclasm, oscillating between the visible and the ostensible in his short story “The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” (*Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, Book-of-the-Month Club, New York, 1964) and in Bernardo Bertolucci’s 1970 film based on it, *The Spider’s Stratagem* (*La strategia del ragno*); in both these works a charismatic glorious leader is revealed to be a traitor, yet the truth unearthed years later is

silenced, and the integrity of the monument erected in his honor is not desecrated, so as not to sabotage the “facts” that constituted the town’s moral. Drora Dominey and France Lebéé-Nadav opt not for a blatant, indirect rhetorical artillery; they merely direct their gaze to the landscape, and behold – an extensive fabric of monuments.

The genealogy of *Everyplace - Everywhere* goes back – by way of shifting - to 1851 France, to the outset of the photographic project of national monuments which extended over twenty years, performed by French heliographic delegations on behalf of Napoleon III, Emperor of the “Second Empire”, for the purpose of national consolidation. Likewise, the artists internalized the intimate everydayness intrinsic to Eugène Atget’s documentation, as well as the critical documentary photography branching out from Bernd and Hilla Becher to Jean-Marc Bustamante, who had an immense impact on contemporary local photography, often drawn to marginal sights. The reluctance to touch upon the theme of monuments in Israeli photography, as in Israeli art as a whole, is tantamount to a consensus; the monuments’ integrity, on the other hand, is central to the Israeli social consensus. The female point of view sets out to comment on all the above via the meticulous tools provided by the language of art.

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