

call to close To

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In recent years, Yair Barak's photographs have been typified by a certain stillness and almost complete lack of human figures. Locked stores, modern villas, wrapped plants, frozen tombstones, and signed book bindings – all standing at attention, as if in a desperate effort at self-immortalization. However, his current body of works boldly introduces human figures. These are not just any human figures, but that of men; and not just any men, but the artist himself, alongside the legendary violinist Chaim Taub, while in the background loom the painter, Uri Lifschitz, and the writer, Jorge Luis Borges. Although the works themselves can be experienced without any prior familiarity, this specificity is of value, as these men create a kind of universal portrait of aging, a creative-biographical horizon stretched between vital continuity and the desire to leave tracks behind, and between turning one's back on life.

The exhibition, comprised of two concurrent chapters, continues Barak's exploration into the possibility (or impossibility) of temporal continuity, the very possibility to logically tie between past and present. His 2014 exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art – "Moving Away from Something he Stares at" was haunted by Walter Benjamin's familiar "Angel of History", inspired by Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus" (New Angel, 1920) monoprint. Stricken, the angel looks back in astonishment at the ruins of history and the horrors of the past, its wings already entangled in the winds of future, forbidding him to linger any longer. Much has been said about the significance of this image in relation to Barak's previous works. The late Nili Goren, the exhibition's curator, wrote in the catalogue: "...photography [...] is regarded by Yair Barak to be the process of moving away, rather than closer. In his works, he examines the various photographic distances – which shift between advancement and withdrawal, while keeping the gaze fixed on the still object, like locking the sight on a target that threaten to allude nothing but the Zeitgeist – Barak's photography provokes the possibility of forgetting"¹.

But what is the role of the somewhat worn image of Angelus Novus in these current works? Here, the temporal distance, that wind of time threatening forgetfulness, is given a concrete, spatial visibility, just as those of the figures it presents. This is a formal kind of concreteness, one of photographic frames, of perspectives and defined power relations between photographer, viewer,

¹ Nili Goren, "Revelment and Concealment in Photography", catalogue of "Moving Away from Something he Stares at" by Yair Barak, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, p. 56.

and subject. Moreover, the act of withdrawal is now replaced by that of moving closer. While Barak's previous works generally presented a centralized composition, where the photographic object was often "locked in target", even if it was covered, duplicated, or manipulated, these recent works confine the image, delimiting and amputating it. The photographer gets "too" close. Much like the angel of history, the viewer wishes, in vain, that he could take a step back in order to complete the picture.

In the video work "In Hindsight (Horizontal)" (2016), the camera cedes nothing. It tenaciously continues its horizontal, automatic, almost autistic scanning of the photographic subject (felt boards stained and marked with paint, used by Uri Lifschitz in his studio) as it moves along point-blank range. In the photographic installation "In Hindsight (Vertical)" (2016), viewers seem to receive what they wish for: the entirety of the wall is bared in all its glory. But even here, only scraps and paint blotches are actually revealed. They exceed the frame, not the photographic one, but the absence-presence of Lifschitz's painting frame. However, no bells or whistles are revealed here, but only history's margins, from which no distance gaze, no vertical perspective and no centralized composition will ever successfully construct a coherent image. In the video work "Echo" (2017), Barak confronts not only his viewers' unfulfilled desire to break out of the frame, but also that of his hero. The artist, appearing in the video, is akin to an orator delivering a speech in a city square, to be heard throughout the streets: the words of Borges' short poem "The Suicide" (1975), declaring a heroic suicide that consumes with it the entire world. But the hero does not stare at the horizon, beyond the cheering crowds. He is enclosed in a room where only the walls echo his words. The viewer longs to see his facial features, but is also imprisoned in the double frame, which is fixated on his Adam's apple. The same repeats in the video "Mirror Therapy" (2017), in which the duplication manifests between the teacher's body (that of violinist Chaim Taub) and that of his students. The bodies of the students are fragmented and disjointed, much as that of Taub himself. The camera isolates an arm, exposes a profile. We are left with fragments of images.

As it is impossible to step back to view the complete picture, it is also impossible to gather echoes of words to a heart-wrenching speech; paint stains to a body of work; or pedagogical gestures to a musical legacy. The possibility to give meaning to a life coming to its end, or already gone, does exist, but is forever framed by the grasp of the present.

"If your photos aren't good enough, you're not close enough" – this famous quote by war photographer Robert Capa is given a new meaning in view of the concerns regarding the credibility

of his most renowned work – "The Falling Soldier" (1936), showing a Republican soldier moments before falling to his death after being shot during the Spanish Civil War. Some claim the photograph was taken dozens of miles from the battlefield. If so, it seems that proximity is not a necessary condition for the creation of a "good" photograph, which over time will become an immortalized image of a political struggle. But can one get too close? Capa, himself killed while marching across a minefield – camera in hand – would probably reply "yes". In Barak's work, the spatial proximity to the image is the incarnation of the temporal proximity to death. It is an ominous, disturbing proximity, confronting the viewer with what he would rather forget – the existential comprehension that a person's corporeal existence, his flesh and his remains, precede his essence, his legacy, and his meaning.

In view of this disjointed biography present in Barak's recent works, it is interesting to include in this current chapter several additional works, in a reflexive attempt to articulate a creative continuity (your perspective, as the reader, is also currently subject to rigid content and editorial choices, much like that of the works' viewers). Indeed, many of the works in this chapter echo previous works of Barak. The series "Ahoy!" (2016) presents yachts photographed in a Denmark winter, wrapped and resting in their cradles on the pier on a Baltic Sea beach. This series is a direct development of the photographer's examination of overt and covert themes, particularly present in his botanical gardens series, where plants encased in plastic or hemp are covered to the last leaf. As with the plants, protected from a climate they are unaccustomed to, so are the yachts put to rest until next summer, until their "season" arrives. Now, the luxury boats are idle, sitting silent like covered bodies or whales washed to shore. This method of manipulating the photographic subjects is reminiscent of Barak's new series "Slough" (2016), where pedestals of sculptures and monuments, lacking the actual objects they are meant to hold, are flattened to float on a black background. With this visual resemblance in mind, we return to the yachts, also vessels, also heroic pedestals for their missing owners, who are now secured in the warmth of their homes.

The other photographs included in this chapter were taken in Istanbul, mediating to some degree the fluid historical status of the city – the previous capital of the Ottoman Empire, and currently under continuous terrorist attacks and at the heart of a political conflict. Two very phallic works undermine two famous Istanbul architectural monuments: In "4 Times Blue" (2016) the four minarets of the Blue Mosque are merged together, and in "Tilt" (2017) the Obelisk of Theodosius is bent.

The Blue Mosque, boasting six minarets, was built in the early 17th century by Sultan Ahmed I. At the time, the sultan suffered harsh criticism for his desire to build an edifice comparable to Islam's most sacred mosque – al-Masjid al-Ḥarām – the Great Mosque of Mecca, which was also adorned with six minarets. For this act of arrogance (bringing to mind the sin of Icarus, discussed by Ran Kasmy-Ilan in this book), the sultan was forced to atone by funding the construction of a seventh minaret for the mosque in Mecca. Barak superimposes the four central minarets of this building to create an upright pendulum, a mirage of megalomania where all minarets are merged into one. In this duplication, the work is reminiscent of the series "The Inner Circle #1-8" (2013), depicting Stonehenge in England. Barak divided the site into eight circular segments, taking eight shots from within the inner circle, and another eight from outside looking in. All these are superimposed to echo the mystical aura of the stones' arrangement.

The history of the Obelisk of Theodosius is also stained by a certain hubris. Originally an ancient Egyptian monument, it was positioned in the Hippodrome of Constantinople by Emperor Theodosius I during the 4th century. The transport of the huge edifice required cutting it into three pieces. Throughout the years, only the top segment was preserved. The ruler, aspiring to commemorate his reign with the tallest of towers, had to make do with its tip. And, as if this punishment wasn't sufficient, Barak further cuts this single remaining piece, the head of the phallus: the column is divided into three photographs, placed atop each other diagonally while forming a titled obelisk; an Egyptian Tower of Pisa. The historical amputation of the tower, as well as its current technical slant, recalls Barak's "Jet" (2013), where the celebrated and very grand Jet d'Eau fountain in Geneva is divided into two screens. One screen shows the water jet soaring upward to the fountain rim, while in the other the water falling to the base. The force and height of the stream, a monument to the capital of diplomacy, are diminished to dull repetition.

The obelisk, minarets and yachts interestingly relate to the two current exhibitions at the Herzliya Artists' Residence and the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art. They emphasize the spatial fragmentation so evident in both, the fragmentation which prevents the viewer, as well as the manly hero, to find meaning. The yachts are not only covered, but excised from context and left to hover with no backdrop; the obelisk is broken; and the mosque minarets are placed on top of each other until becoming one, lacking any solidity or actuality. In their absent representations, all these objects constitute a crippled testimony to the masculine pretention to immortality, to victory and perpetuation, to demonstrating strength and wealth, in both past and present. Obviously, these deconstructed, disjointed and reconstructed images are in no way "true to reality". And yet, it seems

that Barak exposes the "forgery" in a manner that brings us closer to an immanent element of the photographic object. Meaning, the missing representation provides the object with an image of conceptual integrity. The disturbance tells more of the object and its history than its perfect and complete representation. One could say that moving away from the original image by duplicating, amputating, or editing it, allows one to move closer. As with the Stonehenge photographs, near and far are congruent. They become one.

These insights allow us to view "All Inclusive" (2017), a series of hotel room photographs, in a new light, although at first they seem estranged to the other included works. These are photographs of photographs: posters advertising cheap Istanbul hotel rooms, hung outside in the sun for so long that their lamination began to peel and crack. The pictures could not keep on depicting the fake grandiosity of these cheap hotels, and began to consume themselves. The various bedroom arrangements – single bed, double bed with single, three singles – all become sickbeds of inflamed veins or IV lines. Here also a quasi-masculine essence is present, but it is one of wrecked manhood. A masculinity that leads its nightly conquests/purchases to rooms rented by the hour, where lust is spent within minutes. "All Inclusive", promises the title, but much like in these hotels, also in Barak's works (and in life itself) – this promise is meant to be broken.