

Real Time and Real Time at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

VIVIANNE BARSKY

Two kinds of absence structure the field of aesthetic experience at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.... One [is] the absence of reality itself as it retreats behind the mirage-like screen of the media.... The other is the invisibility of the presumptions of language and institutions, a seeming absence behind which power is at work, an absence which artists... try to bring to light.¹

What appears as globalization for some means localization for others; signaling a new freedom for some, upon many others it descends as an uninvited and cruel fate.²

“Beyond the Limitations of Borders”

In the spring and summer of 2008, as part of the cultural events planned to mark Israel’s sixtieth anniversary, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, presented an exhibition proposing to map distinctive trends in local visual art during the preceding decade. Titled *Real Time: Art in Israel 1998–2008*, this was one of six roughly concurrent exhibitions at the country’s major museums, each devoted to a different decade of local art production since the establishment of the state. Owing to the Israel Museum’s comprehensive “campus renewal program” then under way, *Real Time* was mounted in the Weisbord Pavilion, a freestanding addition to the original (1965) museum cluster. The multimedia display was on a par with contemporary shows at prestigious international venues. The stakes were, indeed, set high. In his foreword to the exhibition catalogue,³ the museum’s director, James S. Snyder, asserts that, along with new artistic mediums, and with “boundaries between local and global ... rapidly disappearing ... , a new generation of Israeli artists ... [is] emerging on the global landscape in ways not previously seen.” As for the thematic concerns of the works on display in *Real Time*, Snyder highlights

a preference for universal questions addressed in a quasi-mythic perspective on the one hand, and an inward probing of self and imaginary realms on the other. Both tendencies, he claims, convey an “urge to reach beyond the limitations of borders, while also responding to Israel’s unique historical legacy and its complex contemporary reality.” The exhibition is promoted as “our Museum’s up-to-the minute look at the artistic zeitgeist of this most challenging period in Israel’s developing history ...”

Simmel and Intifada

Jarring with the sanitized foreword rhetoric, the first of two catalogue essays bemoans/berates the mood of the *social zeitgeist* which, it claims, prevailed in the period under review in *Real Time*.⁴ A lecturer in the Hebrew University’s Sociology and Anthropology Department, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, scans the behavioral patterns of Israel in “an era in which there is no longer an overarching [i.e., Zionist] narrative or great consensus, but a range of perspectives, directions, and voices.” This fragmented society reacted with paradoxical apathy to an overwhelming combination of problems, contentions, and predicaments. The sociologist hypothesizes the collective anomie as one of the consequences of the “neoliberal position,” alias “piggish capitalism” (which has permeated Israel over the past decade). She posits this peculiar reaction as an example of what Georg Simmel characterized as the “blasé attitude” of modern metropolitans, which in effect constitutes a defense mechanism and sheer survival tactic against the constant onslaught of stimuli on their sensibilities, combined with an inordinate worship of money and impersonal financial transactions. Another parameter adduced by Vinitzky-Seroussi to explain the process of emotional blunting that afflicts Israel of late is the distinction between two registers of time: linear (“secular, mundane, and continuous”) versus cyclical (“religious ... sacred, ceremonial”). When “ostensibly major, unique events” appear to repeat themselves in cyclical fashion, or constitute “sequels” to such events – as in the decade marked by the Second Intifada, the Second Gulf War, the Second Lebanon War – they tend to similarly desensitize those not directly involved, she explains. At the height of the Intifada, as “one terrorist attack followed another, retaliation triggered retaliation, despair engendered despair,” a point was reached when the outrages seemed to coalesce into a single bloodied blur.

This process, Vinitzky-Seroussi observes, was accompanied by a blurring of political distinctions between Left and Right and a consequent dwindling of the major party blocs, reflecting “exasperation with the familiar disputes: borders, peace, war, religion, and state.” Indeed, both the country’s leadership and its elites “became bored with them.” Hence, she snaps, “It may be no coincidence that Israel’s most prominent project ... in the last decade is the construction of the separation barrier,” a monument to the epochal “tedium, despair, and fear ... without dreams and aspirations.”

Re: Real Time

The sociologist's lament provides a background – or an alibi of sorts – to the catalogue essay written by Amitai Mendelsohn,⁵ co-curator (with Efrat Natan) of *Real Time*. In a balancing act between this critical exposition and the promotional pitch of the director's foreword, he declares that the Israeli art world generally and its younger generation specifically have eschewed a visceral response to the aforementioned cycle of violent events that followed the breakdown of the Camp David peace summit in July 2000, perhaps out of a sense of powerlessness to effect change, but also deliberately embracing “a universal stance in an attempt to rise above the purely local.” In accordance with this premise, the curator highlights “leading young artists”⁶ who, rather than confronting close-at-hand calamities head on, “express dread of global catastrophe, alongside a yearning for escape to distant borders, real or imagined ... [albeit] in the conscious knowledge that real escape is impossible.” Even works dealing with local contexts are seen by Mendelsohn to “do so either as if from above, framing the political present in mythical time, or by revealing hidden currents behind the impassive, self-satisfied surface of Israeli society.” And although he concedes that “political and social activism has always been evident in Israeli art and especially in photography ... since the First Intifada,” significant examples of such an activist stance are glossed over in a footnote.

Mendelsohn points to the coincidence of the aforesaid disengaged or escapist tendency with international developments, such as proclamations of the “end of ideology,” and of art, but also to a countervailing resurgence of figurative and narrative elements, a re-legitimization of aesthetic values, and a fascination with the spectacular. He notes that young Israeli artists are keenly aware of and involved in these processes, pursue studies abroad, and enjoy international exposure in exhibitions and at galleries of “major” cities.⁷ Their works, in whatever medium, tend to be highly polished, and they share a fascination with luridly beautiful end-of-the-world scenarios and catastrophes of the kind conjured up in London's Royal Academy exhibition, *Apocalypse, Beauty and Horror in Contemporary Art* (2000). A number of works in the exhibition, Mendelsohn remarks, interweave universal and local apocalyptic motifs with personal, existential, and artistic elements. There is no gainsaying that; however, the curatorial discussion of the respective strands tends to be disappointingly vague and evasive.

Let us pause on a few examples of works featured in *Real Time* to test and contest the above propositions. Some of the most intriguing images were indeed in the medium of photography. Thus Adi Nes (b. 1966) – one of Israel's internationally most renowned (and remunerated) artists today – was represented by his provocative version of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, *Untitled* (1999) (Figure 1.1; www.artnet.com/artist/182853/adi-nes.html). The staged scene shows a company of Israeli soldiers partaking of a frugal meal laid out on a barracks trestle table; their grouping and gesturing is freely borrowed from Leonardo's rendering of the loaded biblical scene. According to Mendelsohn, this and Nes's other theatrical



Figure 1.1 Adi Nes, *Untitled*, 1999. C-print, 185 cm × 235 cm

portrayals of local soldiers “move beyond the Israeli political situation to connect with the religious and mythical. . . . By transferring this scene to Israeli military surroundings, the artist makes a trenchant political statement on sacrifice and betrayal, while simultaneously translating [the mundane] into timeless divinity: the earthly meal will culminate in an ascent into heaven.” But such a redemptive (Christian) climax would seem to be entirely out of context with contemporary Israeli reality; at any rate, one is left to figure out what the trenchant political statement is about – and who is being betrayed/sacrificed by whom. A gay soldier by his partner? The (savior-)soldier by the state? Or both? In fact, Nes’s photographic oeuvre critiques his country on various levels and counts, individual, social, and political. His series *Bible Stories* (2004–6), for instance, effects an ironic dialogue with the scriptural narratives in allegorized portrayals of present-day Israel as a society of blatant discrimination and inequality – local symptoms of what are also global ills. But whereas Nes’s now legendary adaptation of *The Last Supper* (twice a smashing hit at Sotheby’s, New York) was a “must” in the show, none of the works from the series – four of which have in fact been acquired by the museum – was featured. One, *Ruth and Naomi, Gleaners*, an indictment of societal indifference to the hardships of outcast “others,” reducing them to becoming scavengers, was reproduced in the catalogue without commentary – a curatorial tactic of marginal inclusion recurrently employed in *Real Time*.

The category of works described by Mendelsohn as images “in which the daily passage of time is suspended . . . transmuted, becoming mythical” was represented in the display by another photographic scene, *Flood* (2004), by Barry Frydlander (b. 1954) (Figure 1.2; www.artnet.com/artist/423972813/barry-frydlander.html), depicting a rainy spell in a rundown south Tel Aviv neighborhood. A group of cheery teenaged pupils seek refuge from the downpour in the doorways and along

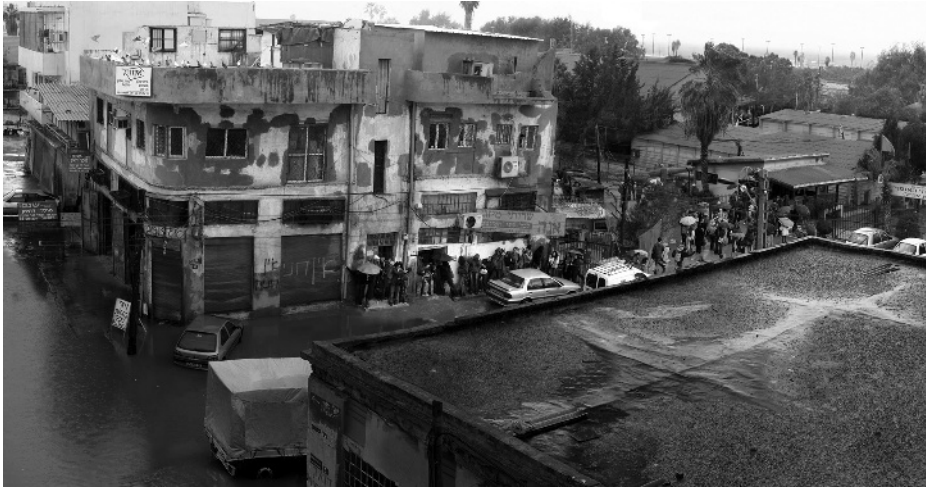


Figure 1.2 Barry Frydlander, *The Flood*, 2004. Chromogenic color print, 127 cm × 234 cm, Edition of 5. Courtesy Andrea Meislin Gallery, New York. © Barry Frydlander.

the wall of a dilapidated 1930s “Bauhaus” building.⁸ Some of the youngsters are headed for an army museum housed in barracks, with an antiquated cannon displayed in the courtyard like a discarded toy. The curator describes the image as a shot caught “from the distant vantage of an observer ... [who] does not attempt to capture the critical moment, the one frame in which a drama takes place,” one of a run of “reworked digital photographs conflat[ing] scenes, figures and times ... into a series of continuous presents that seem to enfold both past and future.” Frydlander of course alludes to the story of the Flood and Noah’s Ark, and the biblical cataclysm presages the ominous future of today’s world, plagued by urban blight and destruction, climate change, pollution, and untold natural disasters. The catalogue text makes no mention of this, just as it flinches from any meaningful discussion of the implications of the Flood when set in contemporary Tel Aviv. But the deluge can be fathomed precisely as a “critical moment” in the (ongoing) drama of this deteriorating neighborhood – both in a literal and figurative sense – with the carefree pre-army youngsters exposed to the threat of a disaster from which there will not likely be a divine salvation.

The artist Sigalit Landau (b. 1969) was represented in the exhibition by three monumental, mixed-media sculptures from her installation *The Dining Hall* at Kunst Werke – Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2007), a phantasmagoric grafting of disparate motifs – topical and historic, artistic and existential, familial and individual. Landau molded the papier-mâché on metal wire sculptures featured in *Real Time* into gruesome flayed figures (Figure 1.3). Mendelsohn observes that one of the sculptures, *RomaMania*, recalls Brancusi’s *Endless Column* (1938) “and its groundbreaking three-dimensional exploration of the sublime.” But what is the significance of Landau’s citation of this work? In an interview,⁹ she explains that the inspiration for the flesh/meat image was the Turkish *döner*, “an augmentation of



Figure 1.3 Sigalit Landau, *Iranian Atom*; *RomaMania*, from *The Dining Hall*, 2007. Metal armature, papier mâché, mixed media, 450 cm × 250 cm × 225 cm; 650 cm × 150 cm × 200 cm. Installation in Kunst Werke – Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

the common Berlin fast food, a kind of [Middle Eastern] shawarma,” which – inter alia – signifies a “feast of gluttony” with deadly outcome. She also describes her intention to create carnivalesque “figurative, monumental sculpture”; thus she (re)created a “Brancusi from a Romanian skewer,” amalgamating the beautiful with the repellent. But there is also a clear reference to the Holocaust, with papier-mâché constituting “a pollution of time and words, a recycling of recycling ... what no-one, and especially in Germany, really wants to see ...” Perhaps the work’s title is intended as an ironic, post-Holocaust (and post-Adorno) gloss on artistic pretense to sublimity? However, *The Dining Hall*, and Landau’s art at large, also addresses the utopian ideals of Zionism and their dystopian metamorphoses or “poisoned fruit.” Mendelsohn touches on the latter motif, but mainly as it featured in an earlier solo exhibition of Landau’s work.¹⁰

One of the morbid pieces in Landau’s installation, *Iranian Atom*, is euphemistically described in the catalogue text as having “the form of a flower ... reminiscent of an atomic mushroom” (it is, rather, a grotesquely phallic image). This, of course, is one of the “universal issues of destruction and human survival” in which, as Mendelsohn notes, Landau is engrossed. But again, the title of the work and the fact that the artist is, after all, Israeli, prompts the question whether she is not conveying her premonition of a local/regional apocalypse ...

Overall, the catalogue text’s discussion of the works appears to sketch, skimp, or skip salient elements of the works chosen for display in accordance with the dubitable claim that, since contemporary Israeli artists aspire to be part of the “global village,” they “are more concerned with universal contexts than with defining the local and relating to it ... searching a way out of the limitations imposed by their surroundings and the rules of the here and now.” Yet Mendelsohn is not devoid of social and political awareness. In particular, he contrasts the present with the old days when Israel was (or believed itself to be) a society firmly based on egalitarian values. The most probing section of his essay, under the evocative heading “The Heart of Darkness,” covers works in *Real Time* that were prompted by a “need to tackle head-on the worst aspects of Israeli society,” as he puts it. Standing out among these was *The Boy from South Tel Aviv* (2001) by Ohad Meromi (b. 1967) (Figure 1.4). This colossal Styrofoam and paper sculpture (both Landau and Meromi combine oversized dimensions with conspicuously nonpolished, perishable materials), which made waves when first shown at a Tel Aviv Museum exhibition in 2001, was installed as the centerpiece of *Real Time*. The figure of the “illegal foreign worker from the Dark Continent,” Mendelsohn explains, represents “Israel’s third-world foreign workers,” most of whom inhabit South Tel Aviv, “the periphery that allows the center to live in comfort.” In addition, alas, the curator infelicitously projects “the erotic image of the naked boy – his air of childlike

innocence notwithstanding” as an embodiment of “what the West perceives as mysterious, tempting, and, at the same time, mortally dangerous.” But that is not at all what the giant image of the lean black boy with his flexed muscles and defiant expression conveys! Rather, it communicates the pent-up resentment and potential self-emergence of long-oppressed continents and peoples – a prospect that “the West” regards with equal trepidation.

Another work by Meromi, a mock border-crossing barrier that flanked *The Boy from South Tel Aviv* in the said Tel Aviv Museum show, is described by Mendelsohn in similarly discomfiting terms as an image “explor[ing] the boundaries between civilization and savagery, the urban and the natural, the flagrantly sexual and the safely concealed.” He appears oblivious to the significance of the barrier as the epitome of discrimination, exclusion, marginalization, and humiliation – all forming part of what Zygmunt Bauman has branded as globalization’s “human consequences.”

Meromi’s barrier was not included in *Real Time*, perhaps because it would have been embarrassingly reminiscent of the contentious checkpoints at which Palestinians from the occupied West Bank – many of them day laborers on their way to Israel – are subjected to all of the indignities mentioned above (the checkpoint system contrived by the Israeli security forces indeed constitutes an extreme and appalling form of the physical barring of unwanted and demonized “others” that characterizes the callously stratified globalized world). Moreover, although the Israeli–Palestinian conflict could not be entirely barred from an exhibition spanning the decade of the Second Intifada, it was addressed in an oblique manner. Among the 40 artists featured in *Real Time*, one, Sharif Waked (b. 1964) represented Palestinian-Israeli artists. The work selected for display was his sequential, all-red painting *Jericho First* (2002), visually inspired by an eighth-century AD (early Islamic period) mosaic floor at Khirbet El-Mafjar (Hisham’s Palace) in Jericho, showing a gazelle being hunted down and devoured by a lion. Mendelsohn did not include *Jericho First* in his catalogue exposition, but the wall caption tritely stated that, the work’s title notwithstanding, it “reaches out beyond [the local conflict] to depict an unending universal struggle between weak and strong, innocent and cruel, good and evil.” Yet the purport of *Jericho First* is surely less hackneyed and more specific than that.¹¹ In fact, Waked has dealt most explicitly with the “local” conflict and its far-reaching human consequences – as in *Chic Point* (2003), an all-too-real surreal rendering of “fashion for Israeli checkpoints ... with the unifying theme of exposed flesh” (www.universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2005/waked).

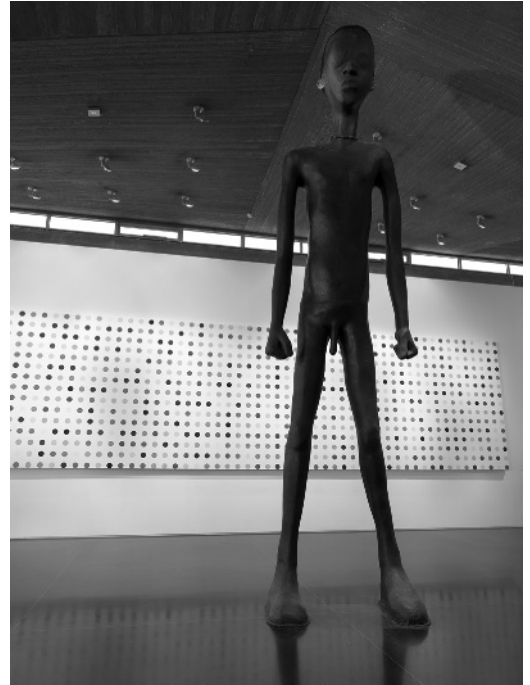


Figure 1.4 Ohad Meromi, *The Boy from South Tel Aviv*, 2001. Styrofoam, paper, hair, plastic beads. 600 cm × 150 cm × 150 cm

Concerning the inclusion of Sharif Waked as the sole Palestinian participant in this exhibition – with a work that “acquiesced in” a universalizing interpretation to boot – it made for an uncomfortable impression of tokenism. Indeed, in an interview with Amitai Mendelsohn conducted on the eve of the exhibition,¹² artist and art critic Galia Yahav faults this imbalance, especially in view of the “flowering of Arab art ... on the local art scene relative to earlier years. Didn’t you invite [these artists]? Did they decline? Why only Waked?” The curator parries her questions by asserting that the artists’ being Jewish or Arab was not a factor in the selection of works, but that the very nature of the display had made it problematic for Palestinian artists to join in. As for the account of Waked’s participation, the interview – and the artist’s reaction to it – produces a *Rashomon*-like effect. Mendelsohn speaks of “a major persuasion campaign. It wasn’t easy for him. There was a six-month dialogue.” “That’s inaccurate,” Yahav retorts. “Two weeks ago the museum purchased *Jericho First*, and that’s the work you will show. In fact, you bought his participation. So he didn’t actually agree to take part.” According to Mendelsohn, however, it was important to Waked that the museum acquire his work (as a mark of his artistic stature); once this was a done deal, he did condone its inclusion in the show. Even so, Mendelsohn admits that his version of the events is liable to be construed as “institutional cynicism, as if we had twisted the arm of the Arab artist. It’s a lost game.” Unconvinced, Yahav acidly insinuates that the museum used Waked as a “pet Arab,” but also that the artist had twisted the museum’s arm to the effect that “you want an Arab – then buy.”

In an email addressed “to all concerned” (May 8, 2008), Waked promptly remonstrated that, when invited by Mendelsohn to participate in *Real Time*, he had explained in no uncertain terms his principled decision not to take part in any of the exhibitions marking Israel’s sixtieth anniversary. If the moral of the story is that truth is elusive, the museum’s acquisition ploy epitomizes a “global” problem of institutional power, possessiveness, and (arguable) propriety vis-à-vis artistic property – exacerbated in the present instance by an inflamed political tangle.

Growth, Change, Uncertainty

With the closing of *Real Time* in late summer of 2008, the Weisbord Pavilion, too, closed down for good. As part of the Israel Museum’s “campus renewal program,” the freestanding structure designed by the renowned Danish architect Jørgen Bo in the late 1980s was slated for demolition, to be replaced by state-of-the-art entrance and restaurant facilities. Bo’s modernist box had served as an unobtrusive but somewhat rigidly laid out annex to the museum complex built in stages in accordance with the modular plan submitted by the Israeli architects Al Mansfeld and Dora Gad to the competition announced in 1959 for a national museum in Jerusalem. The museum was erected on an elevated site in off-center West Jerusalem, overlooking the government compound and the Hebrew University campus, and dramatically set against the Valley of the Cross,¹³ with its massive

ancient Greek-Orthodox monastery. The competition brief outlined the specifications for the supreme national and cultural project in a dry manner conspicuously devoid of rhetoric, emphasizing the functional requirements: The museum complex, set on a 89,000 square meter site, was to comprise two main wings (for archaeology and art); additional pavilions would be constructed later on, according to need and means, without previously built sections having to be demolished in the process of extension. The competitors – selected local architectural and engineering firms – would be granted “maximum freedom” with regard to architectural style, but were urged to allow for a flexible distribution and division of display spaces. Finally, the participants were reminded of the (British Mandate) Jerusalem bylaw requiring “the use of natural stone for all facades.”¹⁴

Mansfeld and Gad’s winning competition entry met these conditions with a grid composition of modular units based on a limited vocabulary of recurrent forms. The rhythmically correlated wings and pavilions had clear antecedents in classical modernism, being especially evocative of Mies van der Rohe’s perspective drawing for the Brick Country House project (1923); the use of exposed concrete in the interior also evinced the brutalist ideal adopted from Le Corbusier by many Israeli architects in the 1950s.¹⁵ But the immediate and explicit conceptual source was contemporary structuralist architecture, derived from the investigation of structural linguistics and anthropology into relationships between fundamental, i.e., pre-existent, systems and their individual “syntaxes” (e.g., Saussure’s *langue* and *parole* and Lévi-Strauss’s tribal kinship patterns). In the second half of the 1950s, Team 10, a splinter group from CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne) engaged in a critical revision of functionalist Modernism. Its members – notably the Dutch architects Jaap Bakema, Aldo van Eyck, and Herman Hertzberger, and the British couple Alison and Peter Smithson – argued for a more human environment with catchwords such as “growth” “change,” “flexibility,” “habitat,” “clusters,” and “sense of place.” Van Eyck put it thus: “Whatever Space and Time mean, Place and Occasion mean more”¹⁶ – a rejoinder to CIAM proselytizer Sigfried Giedion’s influential survey *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (1941 and later revisions). Hertzberger, in turn, coined the suggestive term *musée imaginaire*, connoting the repository of images, memories, and “dialogues” that informs a built environment no less than its functional properties. Bound up with structuralist analysis was a preoccupation with sign, signification, and symbolization; thus structuralist architects thought in terms of symbolic systems and “hypersigns,” relating to a building’s cultural and geographical context.

Mansfeld was quick to absorb the structuralist tenets and terminology, as iterated in his writings over the years. His architectural credo, written in 1963, stresses the need “to provide the logical and efficient physical framework for the man of today, but also to create joy and delight in man’s visual environment and harmonious space-patterns around him ... through the use of three dimensional mathematical ELEMENTS AND SYSTEMS” (architect’s capitalization).¹⁷ In a later, declarative paper, “On Structuralism: Designing for Growth, Change, Uncertainty,” he criticizes the ideal of “permanence in architecture,” and the [functionalists’]

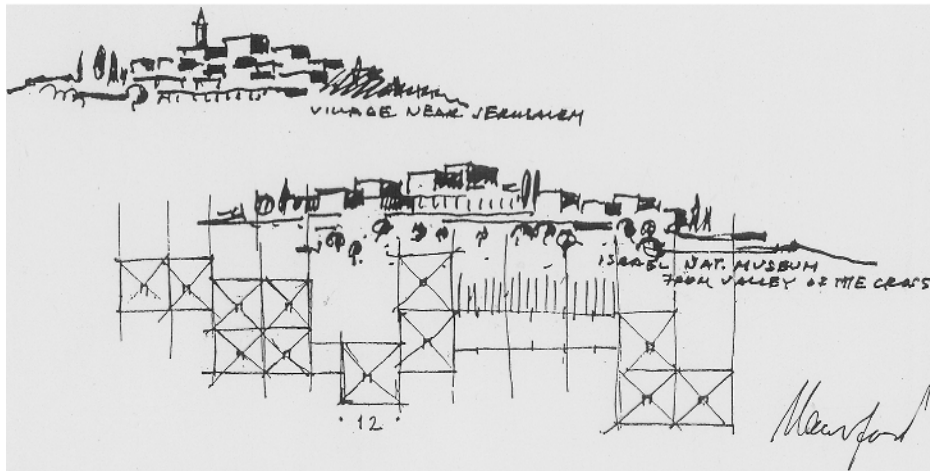
“exaggerated adaptation to a precisely defined purpose” – henceforth to be supplanted by “[g]rowth, extendability and real adaptability to future needs.”¹⁸ These were of course requisite parameters for a new nation that was literally building itself, under uncertain circumstances (though Mansfeld states that the term “uncertainty” refers to “the possible future of a design [or a building]”).

According to an article in the *Journal of the Association of Engineers and Architects in Israel*, published shortly after the Israel Museum’s inauguration,¹⁹ the architects had aspired to “attain a Jewish conception and a new approach to the design of the contemporary museum, which would be closely integrated with the Jerusalem landscape, while answering the needs of a center of Israeli art.” The layout is complimented for its smooth adjustment of staggered floor levels to the contours of the hilly topography; the architectonic axis and view from the entrance plaza onto the Monastery and Valley of the Cross, juxtaposing ancient and modern; and the successfully resolved “additional and specific problem” posed by the museum’s “location on a prominent hill” between the government and university compounds.

The modular configurations, planned with a view to “organic growth” (an oxymoronic notion, in fact) also exemplified the structuralist enthrallment with “archetypal” building patterns. Along with their competition proposal, the architects presented a tripartite sketch in Mansfeld’s hand showing an outline of the cubic units, with the numeral 12 marking their dimensions (12 m × 12 m), and a corresponding perspective view of the east elevation (looking to the Valley of the Cross), topped by a depiction of what is described as a “village near Jerusalem” (Figure 1.5). Though not named in this sketch, it is easily identifiable as Malcha (as indeed confirmed in the architects’ illustrated presentation of their “planning principles”), the ancient Palestinian village of al-Maliha, on a hilly site south of Jerusalem, which, like several hundred villages all over the country, had been evacuated in the course of the 1948 Arab–Israel war,²⁰ but whose typical hewn stone houses remained largely intact, including the mosque and minaret. Aside from that “detail,” the similarity between the counterpoised drawings’ tautly conjoined structures is striking.

The museum complex, clad in slabs of the creamy-white local limestone, indeed appeared to contemporary commentators to have sprung or grown “organically” from its site like the indigenous Arab villages, and was received, in Israel and abroad, as a veritable tour de force. It was also enthusiastically promoted as a local exemplar of the structuralist aspiration to attain, in the words of a colleague of Mansfeld’s, a “spatial organization of architecture according to some cultural schema,” evincing “a new interest in culture–form relationship in both historic architectural and indigenous building in primitive cultures.”²¹ Viewed in this perspective, like sundry “habitats” which inspired the structuralist architects (e.g., the Pueblos in southwestern America, or the Dogon in Africa), Mansfeld’s aggregative gestalt evoked “a community of other works, both historical and contemporary,” such as “the Moslem city complex ... Fatehpur Sikri ... or Mediterranean village architecture,” forging “a structural relationship of space which materializes a culturally institutionalized relationship of sacred and profane,” an epitome of “putting things together meaningfully.”²²

(a)



(b)



Figure 1.5 (a) Al Mansfeld, sketch submitted to the architectural competition for a National Museum in Jerusalem, 1959. Ink on paper, 10 cm × 18 cm (b) The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2010, east elevation

Such lofty descriptions took their cue from the mottoes of Team 10. Van Eyck declared: “The time has come to gather the old into the new; to rediscover the archaic principles of human nature”; and Hertzberger mused: “We cannot make anything new, but only evaluate already existing images.”²³ In hindsight, however, it is difficult not to view this easy culling of elements from hand-picked continents and cultures as an instance of “Eurocentric” prerogative vis-à-vis “the other” – even if that very otherness is projected as sameness, like a “global village” of all times, a synchronic ideal supplanting (or suppressing) awareness of the vicissitudes and

ravages of linear, diachronic time. In Israel, a decade after the 1948 war, at any rate, the “gathering” of the old “village near Jerusalem” into the new museum structure appropriated a human and cultural context literally voided of content: the villagers had been displaced; hence the image was “evaluated” merely or primarily as a dwelling *system*, bereft of its living memories, and hence of its meaningfulness. The architects, however, like most of their compatriots at the time (and since), would have been in denial of the fact that this adaptation of the largely destroyed indigenous “habitat” amounted to an act of de-signification²⁴ – and of the sheer unhomeliness or uncanniness of reconfiguring and scaling up the silhouette of the vacated Palestinian village in the plan for Israel’s national museum. Appropriation, of course, is a tangible means of effectuating “knowledge and power” (Foucault). For all that, the most specific village of al-Maliha/Malcha appears to have served Mansfeld and Gad primarily as a “generic” source of inspiration. In a text written in 1984, Mansfeld describes the (by then significantly enlarged) museum campus as “a composite expanse of interlocking cubic units, atop a hill overlooking the Jerusalem landscape, *a kind of Middle-Eastern ‘village’ of non-monumental character, typical but cohesive and crystallized*” (italics added).²⁵ On the one hand, this wide-angle perspective as it were suggests that marrying the structuralist syntax of signs, links, and “hypersigns” with the morphology of the traditional Palestinian hill village was essentially a formal device. On the other hand, it evinces the mechanisms of psychological repression and displacement encapsulated in the post-1948 Zionist narrative.

The iconic museum silhouette has also been hubristically likened to the Acropolis, a metonymic allusion to classical Greece bespeaking Israel’s resolve to erect an august shrine of art and culture, as well as its hallowed democratic aspirations. In this spirit, the museum’s at once resplendent and restrained aspect could be unflinchingly eulogized as “a symbol for the activist goals and dynamic non-hierarchical structure of the modern Israeli society evolving in the decade following the Independence,” making it “the most significant of the national institutions built in the nation’s capital.”²⁶

Growth, Change, Uncertainty, Deconstructed

In his monumental study *The Israeli Project: Building and Architecture, 1948–1973* (2004),²⁷ the Israeli architect and architectural historian/critic, Zvi Efrat, shifts discussion of the Israel Museum in a new direction, conveying his expressly ambivalent approach to the project at large. In this double-tongued vein, he remarks on the silhouette of the museum, which “the eye synchronously sanctifies as *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Arab village, and Acropolis,” and the “preservation clause designating the building’s contour [i.e., the east elevation, the aspect that most suggestively evokes the silhouette of the Arab hill village] – rather than the building proper – as the object of preservation.” The “holy trinity of modernist severity, folkloristic charm, and classical grandeur,” he concurs, “makes the Israel Museum the masterpiece of Israeli architecture, a symbol one wants to identify with, a structure one reveres.” But this

hampers the examination of its “function as a system of display, viewing, movement, and storage.” A hesitance to tackle these issues has been explained by pious declarations of how the museum “fits in with its environment” etc. It is not, Efrat asserts, only a matter of incidental aesthetic impressions but of desires projected onto the national museum and saturating it with collective shibboleths of “adaptability, viability, flexibility, versatility, and growth.” Yet, he reminds his *hypocrite lecteur*: “‘environment’ is not only a synchronic or topographic relationship (what you see or feel) but also a diachronic or historic sequence (what you remember or forget) ... ‘landscape’ is not nature, but a way of looking and a matrix of identity (regional, national) ... [and] architecture is not only construction but, primarily, construct”; consequently, the Israel Museum “does not ‘fit in with its environment,’” whether geographical or historical, but “defines, symbolizes and adorns the surroundings with which it is to fit in *retroactively*.” Hence “the aesthetic of the Israel Museum is a strategy ... reflecting on Israeli architecture at large ...” Efrat’s binary concatenations eloquently exemplify a filial, “post-Zionist,” challenging of core beliefs of the country’s founding fathers – visionaries, planners, and builders.

Growth, Change, Uncertainty, Reconstructed

When, in 2002, the Israel Museum management resolved to embark on the “campus renewal program” that it had mulled over for more than a decade, Efrat, and his wife and colleague, Meira Kowalsky, were put in charge of the prestigious project – 8,000 square meters of new structures and an additional 20,000 square meters of redesigned existing spaces. In an interview with the team,²⁸ they commend the singularity and flexibility of Mansfeld and Gad’s grid plan, but criticize its functional limitations of access, ambulation, and orientation. Proclaiming that it never was their intention to “mummify” the museum, materially or morphologically, they dwell on the features of the revised program: the addition of an interior access route to the “ceremonial” but physically arduous exterior climb; a new entrance section, flanked by retail and restaurant facilities; and a focal entrance gallery pavilion, jointly conceived with the New York firm James Carpenter Design Associates. According to Efrat and Kowalsky, their reworking “respects the original concept,” being intended “simply to solve systemic problems which have been aggravated over the years.” At the same time, they project it as “a bold intervention, like cutting the Gordian knot of the Israel Museum.” The demolition of the Weisbord Pavilion – going against the grain of the 1959 competition brief, as well as being ecologically and ethically questionable – eludes mention.

The “campus renewal program” was masterminded by museum director James Snyder. Formerly vice-director of New York’s MoMA, Snyder, an astute and suave fund-raiser, secured the major part of the projected cost of some 100 million dollars from a select group of international and local donors, with the state of Israel underwriting the additional outlay. The lavish museum web site advertised the program with the suspense of a promo: the director enthusing over the project at the



Figure 1.6 Computerized rendering of the Israel Museum's new Entrance Gallery Pavilion. James Carpenter Design Associates Inc. and Efrat-Kowalsky Architects

museum's annual international council, well-heeled supporters "breaking ground" for the new construction, a countdown calendar – and guest performances by presidents Shimon Peres and George W. Bush (during the latter's visit to the museum in conjunction with Israel's sixtieth anniversary celebrations). The PR gimmicks demonstrated a firm grasp of donor tastes and quirks and the tactics echoed self-aggrandizing promotional drives of major museums (and their directors) in the United States and elsewhere, with growth touted as the be-all and end-all.

The extension and refurbishment program admittedly adheres to Mansfeld's "open-ended cumulative system" of cubic structures rather than aspiring to outrival it with a modishly vainglorious freeform "icon" à la Gehry and other "starchitects." The reconceptualized features and functional improvements will have to be assessed in due course. As for the new glass entrance gallery pavilion with its stylish louvers (gleaned, at the time of writing, from the computer simulation; Figure 1.6), it "opens up the modernist white box" (a global phenomenon of contemporary museum design emulated by Efrat and Kowalsky) and conveys the impression of a coolly neutral – perhaps overly so – insertion.²⁹ It does not retain any reflection of the "village near Jerusalem," however.

Moving On

James Snyder has been taken to task by local critics for being aloof from and even uninterested in the Israeli art scene. He responds to such criticism by emphasizing that the Israel Museum is not a museum of Israeli art but an "encyclopedic"

museum of world class. In the same vein, he admits that the acquisition of works by Israeli artists is motivated by the recognition they have attained outside Israel: “We are a national museum with an international perspective ... [and] international success definitely counts.”³⁰ And, to his mind, “this success is partly about artistic maturation, [the artists] absorbing their heritage and moving on.”³¹

In the catalogue presentation of *Real Time*, the international success criterion is underscored by such clichés as “global landscape” and “global village” – embracing that aspect of globalization defined by Zygmunt Bauman as “the widely acclaimed ‘hybridization’ of top culture, the culture at the globalized top,” characterized by an unprecedented and unrestricted freedom of movement.³² Thus Israeli artists aspiring and managing to ascend to the globalized top of their profession – which is also an economic top – and enjoying the freedom of museum- and gallery-hopping across continents, were duly celebrated in the exhibition. But such exalted privilege is but one side of the equation; the other, Bauman reminds us, is the “progressive spatial segregation, separation and exclusion ... of people on the receiving end of globalization.”³³ In *Real Time*, that side was at best a half-digested motif. While perturbed by “the destructive influence of globalization” and the conditions of “conflict, war, poverty, and ... unjust suffering of nations and populations that international indifference allows to flourish unchecked,” Mendelsohn contends that contemporary Israeli artists skirt these issues, perhaps as a result of being so close to the “eye of the storm.” Yet, he prevaricates, the “search for alternative paths need not be interpreted as an expression of general apathy [but can be understood rather] ... as a political statement ... and a critique of the insensitivity that seems to prevail in Israeli society.”

This and other equivocations throughout the catalogue text, its commentary on a selection of the exhibited works and its silence on others, the fact that certain works not included in the exhibition are discussed more attentively than those included – and the very decision which works to include or exclude, respectively – all imply that the curators had to tread with circumspection to please and appease all: artists, critics, museum management, supporters, and audience. After all, with *Real Time*, the Israel Museum was paying homage to Israel’s sixtieth anniversary; hence the inclusion of horrendous and fiercely critical images – with a frank curatorial assessment of their message – would have conveyed a dark impression of the country in what the museum director characterized as “this most challenging period.” Nonetheless, the display did contain works which contradicted the claim that the local reality hadn’t impacted on artistic production during the decade of the Second Intifada and its aftershocks. A photograph by Pavel Wolberg (b. 1966), *Purim, Hebron* (2004) (Figure 1.7), shows a Jewish boy in this hot spot of settler provocation and violence, disguised as a flute-playing clown during the festival of Purim, and posed against an eerily empty market (closed down for the event by the Israeli defense forces as a “security measure”) – a sinister portrayal of the Israeli occupation in its most fundamental(ist) lunacy.³⁴ Adi Nes’s photograph *Untitled* (2000) (Figure 1.8), in contrast, shows a (staged) group of youths in the bleak playground of a tenement neighborhood within Israel, watching the slide being



Figure 1.7 Pavel Wolberg, *Purim, Hebron*, 2004. C-print, 100 cm × 150 cm. Collection of Ghila and Zvi Limon, Tel Aviv



Figure 1.8 Adi Nes, *Untitled (from the Boys series)*, 2000. C-print, 100 cm × 125 cm

vandalized by fire – a metaphor for the boredom, frustration, and anger of youth in metropolitan or peripheral ghettos. The artists brought these unsavory realities to light, the images were included in the exhibition (Wolberg, like Nes and Frydlander, forms part of a group of Israeli photographers whose powerful

images make them all but obligatory participants in any serious group show of contemporary Israeli art), and although the catalogue essay passes them over, they are reproduced side by side on a double spread, augmenting the impact of their message, while also (subversively?) exposing the text's elisions and aporias.

As for Efrat and Kowalsky's resolve to "cut the Gordian knot of the Israel Museum," it is equally fraught with contradiction. In Efrat's shrewd analysis in *The Israeli Project*, the original museum plan is dissected to reveal essential flaws of an undisputed masterwork. In the team's comments at the start of the "campus renewal program," the deconstructive edge is blunted and the tone mellowed: having apparently come to terms with these flaws as historical fact and heritage, they are ready to move on ... But historical fact and heritage have a way of casting their reflections on future time. While the "campus renewal" was in progress, the dug-up area earmarked for additional construction was fenced off by a large panel featuring a chronology of the museum's successive building phases and incorporating an oversized reproduction of Mansfeld's sketch of the museum concept juxtaposed with the "village near Jerusalem." The blown-up image – an ambiguous "hypersign" – magnified and perpetuated the imprint of a beautiful but haunting hybrid.

Notes

Quotations from texts in Hebrew translated by V. B.

- 1 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2004, Introduction, 4: "Poststructuralism and deconstruction," p. 48.
- 2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, Introduction, p. 2.
- 3 Amitai Mendelsohn (ed.), *Real Time: Art in Israel, 1998–2008*, exh. cat., The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2008, p. 13.
- 4 Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, "The Decade of Indifference," *Real Time*, pp. 67–72.
- 5 "The End of Days and New Beginnings," *Real Time*, pp. 75–86.
- 6 In fact, the birthdates of the participants in *Real Time* extend between 1954 and 1976; many were born in the mid- and late 1960s.
- 7 In recent years, several Israeli artists have, for example, exhibited at MoMA, an achievement still seen in this country as the zenith of international success.
- 8 "Bauhaus" is a catchword for the functionalist "International Style" buildings constructed in Mandatory Palestine – and especially in Tel Aviv – from around 1930.
- 9 Zvi Szir, "Spoiled Regeneration. An Interview with Sigalit Landau on her Exhibition 'The Dining Hall' at the Kunst Werke, Berlin," *Studio Art Magazine* 173 (May–June 2008), pp. 66–75 (in Hebrew).
- 10 *The Country* (Alon Segev Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2002), a horrific installation that was promptly dubbed "Israel's Guernica."
- 11 The work's title refers, inter alia, to the so-called Gaza–Jericho agreement (alternately referred to also as "Gaza First" or "Jericho First") reached during the Israeli–Palestinian peace talks in 1993–4.
- 12 *Time Out in Tel Aviv*, no. 285–6, April 17–May 1, 2008, pp. 201–2 (in Hebrew).
- 13 So called because, according to Christian legend, the olive wood for the cross on which Jesus was crucified had been harvested there.
- 14 The Committee for the Establishment of a National Museum in Jerusalem, "Conditions of

- the Restricted-Open Competition for the Planning of the National Museum in Jerusalem,” n.d. (winter 1959) (in Hebrew).
- 15 The Miesian and Corbusian elements of the museum design have been duly noted by local architectural historians.
 - 16 *Forum* 4/1960.
 - 17 A revised version of this manifest, titled “My Persistent and Expanding Credo,” was published in *Al Mansfeld: Private and Public Structures*, exh. cat., The Israel Museum, 1995, p. 19.
 - 18 In Anna Teut, *Al Mansfeld: An Architect in Israel*, Berlin: Ernst & Sohn, 1999, p. 131.
 - 19 “Israel Museum, Jerusalem,” *Journal of the Association of Engineers and Architects in Israel* 4 (June–August 1965), p. 13.
 - 20 Walid Khalili (ed.), *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).
 - 21 Robert Oxman, “The Revision of Modernism,” *Structuralism in Architecture: Selected Works of Al Mansfeld and His Team*, exh. cat., The Technion, Haifa, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, 1987, n.p.
 - 22 Oxman, “The Revision of Modernism.”
 - 23 Arnolf Lühinger, *Structuralism in Architecture and Urban Planning*, Stuttgart: Karl Krämer Verlag, 1981, p. 22.
 - 24 See Ghazi Falah, “The 1948 Israeli–Palestinian War and Its Aftermath: The Transformation and De-signification of Palestine’s Cultural Landscape,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 1996, 86(2): 256–85.
 - 25 Al Mansfeld, “The Israel Museum in Jerusalem – An Art Center in Constant Growth,” in Ora Ahimeir and Michael Levin (eds.), *Monumental Architecture in Israel* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1984), p. 107 (in Hebrew).
 - 26 Alex Maller, “Al Mansfeld and the Structuralist Paradigm,” *Structuralism in Architecture* (above, n. 21), p. 9.0.
 - 27 The two-volume survey was published (in Hebrew) following the same-titled exhibition at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Modern Art, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, in 2000–1.
 - 28 Hamutal Sterngast, “Acropolis, Modernist Villa and Arab Village,” Meira Kowalsky and Zvi Efrat Answer Questions on the Israel Museum Regeneration Project,” *Studio* 171 (November–December 2007), pp. 32–9 (in Hebrew).
 - 29 This impression was indeed confirmed when the refurbished museum was inaugurated in July 2010 (during the book’s production process).
 - 30 Naomi Darom, “The Museum Director’s Talent,” *Haaretz*, Markerweek, 7 August 2008, pp. 24–7 (in Hebrew).
 - 31 Ethan Bronner, “Artists Absorb Six Decades and Move On,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2008.
 - 32 Bauman, *Globalization*, Introduction, p. 3.
 - 33 Bauman, *Globalization*, Introduction, p. 3.
 - 34 It is a Purim custom to wear a disguise and revel at the rescue of the Jews from a massacre ordered by the evil Persian king, Haman, as told in the Book of Esther. Here, the bitterly ironic reference is to the shooting massacre perpetrated by a crazed settler, the physician Dr Baruch Goldstein, in the Ibrahimi Mosque located within the precinct of the ancient Cave of the Patriarchs, during Purim of 1994, killing 29 Palestinian worshippers and wounding 150.