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# MAKING NATIONAL HERITAGE MOVE: ILYA RABINOVICH'S *MUSEUTOPIA* PROJECTS

## DINAMIZANDO EL PATRIMONIO NACIONAL: EL PROYECTO «MUSEUTOPIA» DE ILYA RABINOVICH

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### Abstract

This paper examines the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within national historical museum exhibitions by analyzing two photographic research projects of the Moldovan-Israeli artist Ilya Rabinovich. I employ Edward Said's method of contrapuntal analysis to tease out the way in which Rabinovich turns the customary relation between artifacts and exhibitions inside out. I show how the artist's personal history of double migration is not only the driving force behind the projects, but also underlies their aesthetic rationale of dis-identification.

### Keywords

Museum Studies; Heritage; National Identity; Contrapuntal Analysis; Photography; Migratory Aesthetics; Ilya Rabinovich.

### Resumen

Este artículo examina las dinámicas de inclusión y exclusión en el marco de las exposiciones de museos históricos a partir de dos proyectos de investigación fotográfica del artista moldavo-israelí Ilya Rabinovich. Utilizaré el método del análisis de contrapunto de Edward Said para desentrañar el modo en que Rabinovich le da la vuelta a la habitual relación entre objetos y exposiciones. Mostraré cómo la historia personal de la doble migración del artista no sólo es la fuerza conductora que hay tras los proyectos, subyaciendo también una estética racional de la desidentificación.

### Palabras clave

Estudios museísticos; patrimonio; identidad nacional; análisis de contrapunto; fotografía; estética de la migración; Ilya Rabinovich.

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## MAKING NATIONAL HERITAGE MOVE: ILYA RABINOVICH'S *MUSEUTOPIA* PROJECTS<sup>2</sup>

No matter how sophisticated the display and arrangement of objects, subjects and ideas is, museums always conceal other, more delicate and political issues that only become discernible to those who are carefully looking out for them.

Jelle Bouwhuis 2012

**MUSEUMS IN GENERAL**, and historical museums in particular, map out certain narratives of the nation. Whether explicitly in the content of their collections and displays, or implicitly in their positions as estates of national pride, museums are instrumental in developing and reinforcing processes of national identity formation. The historical museum in particular, as an institutional articulation of the relation between power and knowledge, provides the modern state with a deep and continuous ideological backdrop.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it plays a crucial role in transforming the masses into docile citizens, not by way of punishment, but by that of instruction, a «show and tell», rhetorically incorporating the visitors of public museums within the processes of the state.<sup>4</sup> That incorporation takes place both within the exhibition display and through exhibitionary practices surrounding the display: on the one hand, especially within historical museums, the individual's story is expropriated and embedded into the collective narrative, which is more often than not, a national one; and on the other hand, the individual as museum visitor is invited to share power's gaze and position.<sup>5</sup>

Tony Bennett elaborates on the ways in which the museum, as part of an emerging «exhibitionary complex» in early modernity, allowed for an internalization of power through identification, rather than self-discipline: «To identify with power, to see it as, if not directly theirs, then indirectly so, a force regulated and channeled by society's ruling groups but for the good of all: this was the rhetoric of power embodied in the exhibitionary complex – a power made manifest not in its ability to inflict pain but by its ability to organize and co-ordinate an order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order».<sup>6</sup> In other words, the (historical) museum functions as a tool of inclusion, staging a necessity to locate oneself within a collective historical narrative, as well as an opportunity to belong to the shared experiencing of that narrative. Clearly, such processes of (sometimes forceful) inclusion contain within themselves necessary exclusions, and examples of instances in which «heritage, archaeology, art and culture have

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3. BENNETT, Tony: «The Exhibitionary Complex», *New Formations*, 4 (1998), 73, 93.

4. *Ibid*, 87.

5. AZOULAY, Ariella: «With Open Doors: Historical Museums in the Israeli Public Sphere», *Theory and Criticism*, 4 (Fall 1993), 79 [Hebrew].

6. BENNETT, Tony. *Op. cit.* 80.

been tactically mobilized to encourage national subjects to act in often harmful ways towards 'the Other'» abound.<sup>7</sup> Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton go as far as to define the excavation, documentation and display of heritage as political in and of itself, and argue that acknowledging the political nature of interpreting the past is a necessary step for any mindful debate on the matter.<sup>8</sup> I tend to agree.

But what tools do we have to expose the political nature of heritage on display? How can one see the cultural and political frameworks that allow an historical exhibition to be displayed and narrated as history in the first place? Can such deconstructive critique take shape as an exhibition, can it share the visual language and institutional surrounding that it wishes to expose? In this paper I will present two photographic research projects of the Moldovan-Israeli artist Ilya Rabinovich that take this challenge up. In different national and exhibitionary contexts, Rabinovich's photographs attempt to tease out the meta-narratives of historical museum displays by way of turning the customary relation between artifacts and exhibitions inside out. I would like to analyze Rabinovich's strategy –his aesthetic mobilization of historical museum displays –through Edward Said's concept of contrapuntal reading, in order to underscore the mechanisms with which his oeuvre reconfigures collective national memories and identities.

The two projects in question are part of a trilogy that is still in the making. The first part of *Museutopia* –the Moldovan chapter– was photographed in 2008, exhibited in Moldova, Germany and the Netherlands and concluded with a book publication that includes four theoretical essays in addition to color reproductions of the entire exhibition.<sup>9</sup> The second, Israeli chapter has been recently photographed and displayed in Holon, Israel. The final part of the trilogy will focus on Dutch historical museums, and is planned to begin next year. In this paper I will outline and analyze the Moldovan chapter of *Museutopia*, and move on to describe the conceptual similarities and differences with the Israeli chapter. These overviews will lead the way to a theoretical contemplation regarding the potential of *Museutopia* to move beyond the forcefully inclusive assumptions that are generated by national narratives within the exhibitionary complex.

## MUSEUTOPIA I: CAPTURING NATIONAL AMNESIA

The first chapter of *Museutopia* focused on a number of historical museums in Chişinău, Moldova, and examined their ambivalent relationship to the nation's communist history. Mainly focusing on the National Museum of History and Archaeology and the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History, Rabinovich composed collages of past and present footage, combining archival material

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7. SMITH, Laurajane and WATERTON, Emma: «Heritage and The Politics of Exclusion», *Current Swedish Archaeology*, 19 (2011): 53.

8. Ibidem

9. VAN BAAR, Huub and COMMANDEUR, Ingrid (eds.): *Museutopia: A Photographic Research Project by Ilya Rabinovich*. Amsterdam, Alauda Publications, 2012.

with his own photographs, to juxtapose the museum's displays during and after Moldova's communist episode.<sup>10</sup> Moldova was incorporated into the USSR during the 1940s and remained under Russian Communist rule for about five decades. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova declared itself an independent state in 1991. Rabinovich's collages, presented on eleven large panels that included also elaborate captions, delineate a pivotal change in the way Moldova narrated its official history, during and after soviet rule. In a didactic manner, the collages point to a decisive forgetfulness that materialized in a radical reconfiguration of Moldova's history.



FIGURE 1. ILYA RABINOVICH, *MUSEUTOPIA* (DETAIL). FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY AND NATURAL HISTORY, CHIȘINĂU, 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

The choice to focus on Moldovan historical museums (and later on, on Israeli and Dutch ones) stems from the artist's personal biography. Rabinovich was born in Chișinău and migrated with his family to Israel at age seven. Later as an adult Rabinovich migrated once more, this time to the Netherlands. This narrative of double displacement heavily informs the *Museutopia* project, and as the artist recounts in an interview with Huub van Baar in the book version of the project, his return to Moldova was initially a quest to search for his roots. Consequently, Rabinovich's first visits to the historical museums were not critically motivated, and

10. In addition, Rabinovich photographed *The National Museum of Fine Arts*, the *Glory of Labour Museum*, and the former *Republican Museum of Friendship Among the People*.

were part of an archival search for historical materials that might shed light on the situation in Chişinău during the time of his childhood.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Rabinovich went to the museums in search for his place within the «order of things», for his place within the historical national narrative. Yet that search was not realized in a direct way, since the narratives that Rabinovich was looking for were forcefully missing from the displays. However, the artist's encounter with this blatantly-present absence led the way to the more formal questions that make up *Museutopia*, regarding the relation between national historical narratives and museal strategies of display. He recounts:

«While visiting this museum and the other ones, I was faced not only with the difficulty of entering my own life story, but also with the confusing histories and identity politics propagated by the national museums. I started to focus on these political contexts ... [and] I simply could not believe what I saw: the Communist era was far from absent. Contrary to my expectations, it was highly present, although in the guise of a ghost. If we are to believe what I saw in these museums, Moldova's Communist past haunted – and continues to haunt – its present.»<sup>12</sup>

This is the gist of *Museutopia*, its critical essence. A sole focus on the overt differences between past and present displays in the *Museutopia* posters would be limited to the exposure of a predictable process of «official forgetting», where the current Moldovan museums narrate the newly-born nation's history through referencing an ancient past, while omitting the more recent historical chapter of soviet rule. Such omissions are to be expected when following Tony Bennett's understanding of the museum's role in educating and seducing the docile citizen, and Laurajane Smith's definition of heritage as a dynamic «act of making meaning in and for the present».<sup>13</sup> But Rabinovich's collages do something else, something more, and that is where the medium of photography allows for innovative insight. For, next to the presentation of a break in terms of display content, Rabinovich's photographs expose an underlying and unacknowledged *continuity* between soviet and post-soviet narratives in terms of display strategies and interior design. In this sense, *Museutopia* presents a visual variation of what has been termed by Edward Said as contrapuntal reading or interpretation.

Said introduced the term in his book *Culture and Imperialism* more than two decades ago, to designate a mode of reading that contains «simultaneous awareness both of the ... history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts».<sup>14</sup> In music theory, contrapuntal motion has to do with the respective movement of simultaneous melodic lines as they play off one another. Their motion can be parallel, similar, contrary, or oblique; in any case, the resulting polyphony has a sense of order that is derived not from one melody or another, but from their overall theme. Transporting the

11. VAN BAAR, Huub: «Out of Place: Haunting Pasts, Withering Presents. Huub van Baar in Conversation with Ilya Rabinovich». In VAN BAAR, Huub and COMMANDEUR, Ingrid (eds.). *Op. cit.*, 29.

12. Idem, 29-30.

13. BENNETT, Tony. *Op. Cit.*; SMITH, Laurajane: *The Uses of Heritage*. New York, Routledge, 2006, 1.

14. SAID, Edward: *Culture and Imperialism*. London, Vintage Books, 1994, 59.



term to the field of comparative literary analysis, Said argues for a textual interpretation that takes into account the many histories that interlace around a text and give it shape. Distinct from Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualization of polyphony as aural metaphor for the multiple meanings within a given text, Said's contrapuntal reading resides both within and around the text, in the «structure of reference» within which a text is anchored. It is the overall theme that is produced by a variety of cultural languages, histories, ethnographies and authors that are not necessarily connected to one another or to an official ideology, but that nevertheless create a structure of meaning for a given point in time, that is the starting point for a contrapuntal analysis of any given text.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, a contrapuntal reading does not discard the text in favor of context but re-reads the text through the multilayered structures of reference that give it shape. Said asks of literary scholars to read a text not only against, but also together with the various and simultaneous cultural attitudes that are embedded in its structure. Transposing his theory to the world of visual analysis would mean interpreting an image in relation to the various and simultaneous frames of vision that form and inform it: to read the respective motions of the work and the frame, the ergon and the parergon. This interpretive gesture subsists, to my mind, in the aesthetics of *Museutopia*, specifically in its emphasis on the relation between the objects on display and the structures of reference that surround them.

The repeated focus in many of the *Museutopia* images on the metal frames that surround artifacts (as in figure 1 from the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History) is a case in point. These frames function as visual metaphors, and represent the ways in which visitors see much of the post-communist museal narrative through frames that belong to the communist era.<sup>16</sup> The frames are thus both physical and representational, symbolizing a persistence of the past in the present, and exposing a conceptual oversight on the part of the museum personnel. In line with Said's view of contrapuntal analysis, Rabinovich's photographs stage an interplay of contrary motion between artifact and frame.

Another example can be found in *Museutopia*'s focus on the interior design of the National Museum of History and Archaeology, which has not been altered much since its previous incarnation. Here, attention to those aspects of the museum that do not take part in the official display, such as corridors and office rooms, underscores an architectural aesthetic that moves in parallel motion with a supposedly discarded historical period of communism. Whether literal or conceptual, the frames of reference that surround the exhibition-matter are re-introduced into the image, and present an unexpected complex of counterpoints between the exhibition's overall message and underlying meaning.

The decisive forgetfulness of the Moldovan historical museum displays that materializes in a radical re-telling of Moldova's history is thus presented as far from complete. *Museutopia*'s orchestration of past and present footage underscores the

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15. *Idem*, 59-61.

16. VAN BAAR, Huub. *Op. cit.* 32.



FIGURE 2. ILYA RABINOVICH, *MUSEUTOPIA* (DETAIL). FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY. CHIȘINĂU 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

fact that such re-telling is made only on the overt, superficial level of the historical narrative. The obliterated historical moment that the artist was searching for could still make itself available to his attentive gaze, and through him, to us. What started out as a personal project, a quest for roots, information, and clarity, ended with an insight into the role of repressed narratives within one's psyche, whether one is an individual body, or a collective national one. If the historical museum commonly works expropriate the individual's narrative and embed it within the collective, the narrative that is being embedded here is that of repression, which nevertheless continues to structure one's perspective.

## *MUSEUTOPIA II*: FIGURING NATIONAL MEMORY

There is an affective drive behind Rabinovich's austere aesthetics in *Museutopia I*, where emotional distance and empathy are intertwined. This concerns «movement» in the other, emotional sense of the word. The echo that can be felt in the images, the sense of emptiness that stems from the calculated camera angle, reflect the artist' position as somewhat absent from the spaces that he captures.<sup>17</sup> In response to an understanding of his aesthetic signature as a staging of a «passionless

17. MISIANO, Viktor: «The Gaze, Diaspora and Trauma: Interview with Ilya Rabinovich». In VAN BAAR, Huub and COMMANDEUR, Ingrid (eds.), *op.cit.*, 17.

gaze», Rabinovich agrees, and defines his art as stemming from an inability to express what is bothering him. His works in *Museutopia I* are devoid of protagonists or events, and present empty spaces in suspension, waiting for viewers to actively rework their potential narratives.<sup>18</sup> Such aesthetics of alienation involve a dis-identification with the exhibitionary complex, an inability to play along with its attempt to produce a place for the individual in the order of things. For Rabinovich specifically, such aesthetics are inherently related to his experience of double migrancy. His personal composite relation to national narratives materializes in both *Museutopia* chapters into a spatial design that keeps him both in and out of the image, albeit in different ways: what ended up being a contemplation on haunting memories in Moldova, is now taking on a different shape.



FIGURE 3. ILYA RABINOVICH, *MUSEUTOPIA II* (DETAIL). FROM THE IDF HISTORY MUSEUM TEL AVIV 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

*Museutopia II* focuses on military historical museums in Israel and examines the narrative frames that they construct around the issue of national belonging. The aesthetics of a present-absence is just as visible here, as is the artist's search for meta-narratives that subsist within museum displays, in details that seem secondary or incidental but that Rabinovich's camera exposes as crucial for the structuring of the display's significance. Yet the move from Moldova to Israel involves some significant alternations as well. For while in Moldova the overt relation to communism was that of rejection and suppression, in Israel the relation to the military is that of identification and glorification; therefore, the present *Museutopia* chapter had

18. *Idem*, 24.

to find new ways to deal with the sub-layers and internal contradictions involved in the exhibitionary strive to construct a common national narrative. This change of focus from repressed communism to celebrated militarism led to an exposure of a different set of counterpoints between overt and covert historical narratives, and resulted in an alternate display strategy. It also involved a dissimilar visual focus on bodily figures within the display.

Rabinovich's decision to focus on *military* historical museums in *Museutopia II* is based on the central and complex place that the military holds in Israeli society, culture, and most importantly, in Israeli national identity. Due to a variety of reasons, including Israel's decades-long conflict with and occupation of Palestine and the related phenomenon of «civilian militarism», military service in Israel is closely connected to the figure of the hegemonic Jewish Israeli citizen.<sup>19</sup> The military holds a mythical status as a «melting pot» and a place where one enters as an immigrant and leaves as an authentic Israeli. Military service thus delineates the boundaries of the political collective; furthermore, and in contrast with its egalitarian image, military service helps to shape a hierarchy of belonging that often reproduces social stratification.<sup>20</sup> The combat soldier specifically functions as a symbol for hegemonic masculinity, and is often used as an unofficial criterion to determine levels of citizenship. Non-hegemonic identities who are also drafted often negotiate their social status through their military service.<sup>21</sup>

Following the centrality of the military to the construction of national identity, with its consequences for inclusion and exclusion, examining the civil narrative of the Israeli nation-state with and through militaristic exhibitionary complexes and the structures of meaning that they put forth is not superfluous. For Rabinovich, in any case, the historical military museum, in its telling and retelling the story of assimilation, was the ideal place to continue his critical engagement with national narratives from the point of view of migration. He enters the museum as a potential protagonist, his initial quest stemming, once more, from the repeated (failed) attempt to find himself portrayed, as moving subject, as migrant, within the exhibitionary complex.<sup>22</sup>

The repeated focus on bodily figures within military historical displays in *Museutopia II* presents itself most clearly as a central visual deviation from the aesthetics of empty spaces photographed in Chişinău. But this change, I argue, does not lead to a lessened sense of dis-identification. For the figures in *Museutopia II* are rarely whole, and seldom in harmony with their surroundings. Take, for example, figure 4,

19. The term «civilian militarism» was coined by sociologist Baruch Kimmerling in the early nineties to designate a cognitive dimension of militarism that informs civilian institutions and daily practices, which he saw as paradigmatic to the Israeli case. I develop the term in relation to Israeli visual culture in my forthcoming study of contemporary Israeli artworks. KIMMERLING, Baruch: «Patterns of Militarism in Israel», *European Journal of Sociology*, 34 (1993), 196–223. ROEI, Noa: *Civic Aesthetics. Militarism, Israeli Art, and Visual Culture*. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

20. SASSON-LEVY, Orna: «Constructing Identities at the Margins: Masculinities and Citizenship in the Israeli Army», *Sociological Quarterly*, 43:3 (2002), 357–9.

21. Idem, 360.

22. ROEI, Noa and RABINOVICH, Ilya: «In Conversation». In: <נועה-רוי-בשיחה-03/21/5102/li.gro.varaam//:ptth /עם-איליה-רבנוביץ> [February 13, 2016].





FIGURE 4. ILYA RABINOVICH, *MUSEUTOPIA, CHAPTER II* (DETAIL). FROM IDF HISTORY MUSEUM, TEL AVIV. Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 5. ILYA RABINOVICH, *MUSEUTOPIA, CHAPTER II* (DETAIL). FROM IDF HISTORY MUSEUM, TEL AVIV. Courtesy of the artist.

a staging of a soldier's sleeping room in the Israeli Defence Forces History Museum. The photograph underscores an attempt at a genuine reenactment, including the placing of personal equipment in different locations in the room and posters on

the wall, all of which should, in principle, create a «reality effect» à-la-Barthes and an aura of authenticity. Yet the soldier is standing in a corner of the room, in full winter gear, looking –together with a militarized pin-up poster of an Israeli women soldier– at some danger that is lurking outside of the picture frame. The effort towards creating a feeling of homeliness, intimacy and warmth is undone by the figure's dissonant gear and positioning, leading to a sense of estrangement. A more blatant exposure of absurd compositions arises in an image that presents a soldier figure on a skateboard, of all things, posing between collages of melded weaponry, in front of a pink cubist painting of tanks and missiles and holding a Shofar.

What can one make of the arbitrary location of bodies in the display, especially as they contrast with the meticulous presentation and captioning of weapons of all sizes and shapes, from glass cabinets for different types of rifles and bullets (figure 5) to tanks and missiles outside the display rooms? For Rabinovich, the contrary motion between the glorifying exposition of military *objects* and derogatory presentation of figural *bodies* exposes a particular structure of meaning, where the museum-visitors as potential protagonists are expected to understand their part in the national narratives, as supporting figures to the larger, more respectable and significant body of the state.

Significantly, within this sub-group of *Museutopia* images that focus on bizarre staging of bodily figures, there are images that expose a belittling attitude towards the body of the migrant in particular. This is done either by focusing on the replacements of such bodies with representational objects such as suitcases, sleeping bunks, books and the like, or by exposing the way in which such figures are presented as two dimensional shadows, inaccessible behind a screen of sorts. A case in point is figure 6, presenting a somewhat peculiar scenario. A bare female mannequin is presented here laying on her back on a lower level of a bunk bed, her head tilted to the right, her breast exposed. A male mannequin wearing a beret, a winter coat and shoes – but no pants – is positioned across from her, looking somewhere beyond and above the camera, his back attached to the top level of another bunk bed, his feet dangling in the air. This partly-suggestive partly-bizarre image is not actually on display at the Clandestine Immigration museum in Haifa; it is staged behind a see-through curtain, to act as background setting to an audiovisual show, which retells the story of the capturing of an illegal immigrant boat by the British in 1947. When Rabinovich visited the museum, he peeked backstage through an emergency exit door, and found this scenario. For him, this scene exposes and epitomizes a negligent attitude towards the figure of the migrant, which is staged carelessly and acts only as shadow. In addition, the scene exposes a trivializing attitude towards the audience, presenting them with a forcefully inclusive expectation to identify with the overall narrative, and therefore turn a blind eye to the poorly staged setting and take active part in imagining the scene.<sup>23</sup>

There are hundreds of heritage museums in Israel, a dozen of which belong to the Ministry of Defense. These museums are open to the general public but most

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23. *Ibidem*.

of their visitors arrive in organized groups of school classes, soldiers on a cultural excursion, or tourists.<sup>24</sup> The visitors of such museums are mostly insiders: future, present, or past participants in the military and security institutions. They are, in a sense, potential protagonists in their capacity as soldier-citizens.



FIGURE 6. ILYA RABINOVICH, *MUSEUTOPIA*, CHAPTER II. DETAILS. FROM THE CLANDESTINE IMMIGRATION AND NAVAL MUSEUM, HAIFA. Courtesy of the artist.

The repeated focus on figural scenes in *Museutopia II* points to intriguing relations between the various bodies that circulate in the exhibitionary complex in this context. Ariella Azoulay, writing about historical museums in Israel, defines four subjects that are involved in the dissemination of a past image: the exposing subject, the presented one, the implicit viewer, and the one whose narrative is absent from the display, but whose absence marks that narrative's potential threat to the existing image of the past.<sup>25</sup> The dominant historical exhibition in Israeli culture until the 1970s is defined by Azoulay as Judeo-centric, where the first three figures merge into one: the implicit viewers of a given exposition were at the same time also the exposing subjects, as well the authorized representatives of those subjects on display. In other words, Jews exposed their past to themselves.<sup>26</sup> Since the seventies, many peripheral groups within Israeli culture have inserted their narratives into what was until then a monolithic hegemonic single voice, and yet the

24. COHEN-MOSSEK, Maya: «Israel's Military Museums: History Museums or Memorial Monuments?» In: <<http://www.maarav.org.il/english/2015/12/israels-military-museums-history-museums-or-memorial-monuments/>> [February 13, 2016].

25. AZOULAY, Ariella. *Op. cit.* 88.

26. *Idem*, 88-89.

multiplicity of voices has not led to alternative representations but to a flat inclusion of those potentially alternate narratives into past images already crowned as central in the collective mind.<sup>27</sup> Azoulay points to one stable «other» whose narrative remains out of the picture throughout the struggle of different groups for inclusion, that is, the figure of the Palestinian as historical agent, as exposing subject. The possibilities for Palestinians to represent the present or the past in public Israeli space were always limited and under direct or indirect censorship.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, a body that is emphatically missing from the museal displays that are presented in *Museutopia II* is that of an enemy other, strengthening an understanding of historical military museums as representing national identity rather than narrating historical occurrences.<sup>29</sup> Palestinian figures are literally cut out of the picture, not only as exposing agents and implicit viewers, but also as presented subjects within the Israeli narrative. The rare cases that portray a figural «other», against which the military apparatus is set to act, do so in a flat and fragmented way, presenting Arab figures as faceless cutouts from newspapers of the period.<sup>30</sup> The consequences of such effacements for the museums' structure of meaning cannot be overstated. Reading the absence of Palestinian figures contrapuntally, next to the meticulous presentation of military paraphernalia, romantic commemoration of historical military figures, and sloppy representation of generic soldiers and civilians, exposes the fact that the internalization of power that is enabled through historical museal displays involves here a complete obliteration of the Palestinian-as-subject, and does not allow even minimal engagement with it other than as an abstract and eternal threat.

In his search for a figuration of an enemy other, Rabinovich's camera zooms in on the silver captions melded onto captured Syrian or Egyptian tanks and missiles in the Israeli Defence Forces History Museum. The captions emphasize the fact that these tanks and missiles were manufactured in Germany, France or Russia. For Rabinovich such emphasis does not only further conceal the Arab figure and its narrative; it also exposes, again, an expectation for clear-cut dis-identification on the side of Israeli Jewish migrants. Presenting the Soviet Union as the enemy to an implicit viewer that is, in this case, a Soviet migrant, exposes the contrary motion between the hegemonic Israeli national narrative, where migration is connected with redemption and new beginnings, and the narratives of trauma and loss that were forcefully repressed. Rabinovich recounts:

«I have never been able to talk with my parents or immigrant friends about the migration process from the perspective of trauma. Trauma was virtually a taboo subject. The Israeli culture in the 1970s and 1980s did not encourage this discussion either. Israeli society was busy creating its own navel-gazing culture. As immigrants, we were expected to forget, ignore or

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27. *Idem*, 91.

28. *Idem*, 90.

29. Maya Cohen-Mosseck interprets Israeli military museums through Pierre Nora's definitions of history and memory to show how they function more as memorial monuments, and less as historical institutions. COHEN-MOSSEK, Maya. *Op. cit.*

30. *Ibidem*.



deny our past and to assimilate in order to become the desired 'true Israelis'. For me, it is still painful to remember the moments when we mocked and ridiculed newly arrived immigrants who were struggling to mask their Russian accent while talking in Hebrew».<sup>31</sup>

Thus, for Rabinovich, in addition to the Palestinian other whose absence haunts the military museum, there is another central yet suppressed element within the Israeli national narrative. This element is not a historical ideology, as was the case in Moldova, but a historical figure: the figure of the closeted migrant, of the one who has officially passed through the melting pot but who remains foreign to some extent by virtue of his multiple belonging and repressed memories from other times and places. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the hegemonic Israeli narrative of assimilation, on which *Museutopia II* focuses, exposes the frivolous position of the migrant figure within the national narrative and its accompanying authoritative past image. This is done, on the one hand, by picturing the exhibit from an estranged position, exposing the sloppy presentation of its heroes and the fetishistic collection of military memorabilia. On the other hand, there is an exposure of the way in which the migrant-as-presented-subject is visually designed as shadow or process, as a present-absent subject on display. The migrant's story is not eliminated but incorporated into the exhibitionary complex in a way that makes this figure only a figure in passing, a figure in becoming, striving towards the goal of assimilation.

## CONCLUSION: MUSEUTOPIAS ON THE MOVE

Rabinovich's underlying ambivalent quest to find his place within museal historical displays leads, twice, to a sense of absence, both on a physical level (the present-absent body of the photographer within the composition) and on a conceptual one (the present-absent body of the citizen within the national narrative). This presence-absence is a recurring motif in much of Rabinovich's oeuvre and might even constitute the core of his work, what lures viewers to linger on his images in the first place. In the *Museutopia* projects, Rabinovich maneuvers this aesthetic strategy to expose contradictory elements within what is otherwise presented as a narrative whole. He refuses to enact a «suspension of disbelief» and focuses instead on details that –much like himself– do not fit comfortably within the national meta-narrative. What remains to be asked is the following: if the point was to photograph museum exhibitions from the angle of the pasts that they hide, how is this point affected by the fact that both *Museutopia* chapters end up being museal exhibitions in themselves? Can they, should they avoid the disciplinary mechanism of the exhibitionary complex? If not, what new blind spots are created through their lens?

A preliminary answer to this question lies in Ariella Azoulay's definition of *exposition* as the central function of historical museums. Exposition, according to

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31. MISIANO, Victor. *Op. cit.* 21.

Azoulay, involves the transformation of documents and certificates into exhibits in and of themselves.<sup>32</sup> Exposition differs from conservation in the sense that «its object is not the thing 'itself' but a representation of it, an aspect of it that acts as witness».<sup>33</sup> The «authentic» object, that acted in the traditional museum as witness, is replaced here with the «created object» that is the product of projection: if the power of the authentic object originates from the fact that «it was there», the created object is the realization of an idea – it is an object that *was supposed to be there*. Following Azoulay, the incorporation of the created object into museal display, and the subsequent blending of conservation and exposition patterns, led to a rise of an ideological institution – the historical museum – that camouflages itself as an impartial and universal commemorator and conservator of the past regardless of the present's political, cultural, or social contexts.<sup>34</sup>

Crucially for our case, Azoulay points to the camera as one of the elements that enables exposition to take place. The camera allows for the mobilization of the past and its commemoration by any group or individual.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the act of exposition secludes an object and frames it apart from its surrounding, within an exposition space, which is further framed within the exhibition space and within the broader public space. Reading *Museutopia* through Azoulay, it is plausible to suggest that the project's display within the exhibitionary complex holds a subversive value. Rabinovich turns the expository practice of the military historical museums into his object on display. Transforming documentation into an exhibit, he mimics the museum's practice and commemorates it, setting it apart from its surrounding space. This is not an undoing of the expository act, but a repetition, an addition of a melodic line that plays off the existing ones in different directions as a way of augmenting the volume, or visibility, of their resulting structure of meaning.

To end my contemplation on the *Museutopia* projects, I would like to tease out aspects of my analysis that relate to the notion of movement, the theme of this volume. The first, and perhaps most obvious aspect is that of migration. The artist's personal history of double migration is the motive behind the *Museutopia* projects, both in the sense of being the driving force that led to their creation, and in terms of informing their underlying aesthetic rationale. In other words, the aesthetics of dis-identification that materializes in the empty spaces of Chişinău as well as in the figural compositions of Tel Aviv is closely related to the artist's infelicitous experience as national subject, and to his inability to immerse himself, as potential protagonist, in the authoritative and inclusive historical narratives that surround him in the spaces that he captures. Migration is not the subject matter of *Museutopia*, but it is its *raison-d'être*. In this sense, Rabinovich's work joins an extensive

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32. AZOULAY, Ariella. *Op. cit.* 79.

33. *Ibid*, 85 [my translation].

34. *Ibid*, 83-85.

35. *Ibid*, 79.

repertoire of contemporary artworks that employ migratory aesthetics as their ground for experimentation.<sup>36</sup>

The second, but not secondary, aspect of movement in this paper pertains to Said's notion of contrapuntal reading, through which I understand *Museutopia's* analytical force. To recap, contrapuntal analysis stems from music theory and has to do with the respective motion of simultaneous melodic lines as they play off one another. Said, a migratory thinker if there ever was one, allowed the term to transgress disciplinary boundaries and to help us think of literary objects as reverberations of the various socio-historical currents that surround and inform them. I use the term in order to lay bare the way in which *Museutopia* presents us with a visual variant of Said's theory, underscoring the contrapuntal motions of multiple narratives that make up national history's structure of meaning within the exhibitionary complex. For me, *Museutopia* exposes movement itself – the dynamics between object and frame, between presence and absence – as the process where meaning is being made.

Finally, movement resides also in the mobilization of historical museum displays, in their transfiguration from expository agents to expository artefacts on display. There is, from this perspective, an additional critical angle to *Museutopia*, one that subverts the rhetoric of power embodied in the exhibitionary complex and its relation to museum goes. If, following Tony Bennett, the museum's work consisted primarily of organizing an order of things and producing a place for the people in relation to that order, Rabinovich's *Museutopia* chapters turn the tables and produce a place for the museum in relation to the artist's personal narrative.<sup>37</sup> Such an act of appropriation suggests a more active and dynamic role in experiencing and interpreting museal displays than Bennett's theory would initially allow.

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36. The term «migratory aesthetics» was coined by Mieke Bal to designate a mode of aesthetics that is not limited to direct migratory experience but that refers to the «sensate traces of the movements of migration that characterize contemporary culture» as a whole. The term is meant as a «ground for experimentation» for experiencing and articulating a mode of being where mobility is not the exception but the rule. Rabinovich's aesthetics of dis-identification form, to my mind, a productive example of such aesthetics, as they refuse and refute the flat experience of belonging that is offered by the national history museums' displays. BAL, Mieke: «Lost in Space, Lost in the Library». In DURRANT, Sam and LORD, Catherine M., *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making*. Thamyris/Intersecting, 17 (2007), 23. BAL, Mieke and Á. HERNÁNDEZ-NAVARRO, Miguel: «Introduction». In BAL, Mieke and Á. HERNÁNDEZ-NAVARRO, Miguel (eds.), *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture. Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*. Thamyris/Intersecting, 23 (2011), 10.

37. BENNETT, Tony. *Op. cit.* 80.

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# ESPACIO, TIEMPO Y FORMA



SERIE VII HISTORIA DEL ARTE  
REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA

Dossier by Mieke Bal: *Art Moves: Performativity in Time, Space and Form / El Arte (Se) Mueve: Performatividad en el Tiempo, el Espacio y la Forma* por Mieke Bal

219

15

235

45

261

71

Surface Explorations: 3D Moving Images as Cartographies of Time

279

93

117

309

143

329

159

351

171

373

193





# ESPACIO, TIEMPO Y FORMA

## Miscelánea · Miscellany

**395** RAIMUNDO MORENO BLANCO  
Aportaciones a la arquitectura y la historia del monasterio del Sancti Spiritus de Ávila / Contributions to the Architecture and History of the Monastery of Sancti Spiritus in Ávila

**417** JOSÉ MANUEL ALMANSA MORENO  
Estudio y recuperación de la Iglesia de San Lorenzo, Úbeda (Jaén) / Study and Recovery of the Church of San Lorenzo, Úbeda (Jaén)

**459** MANUEL GIL DESCO  
Imágenes de la locura en la Edad Moderna: escarnio y máscara en el discurso del poder / Images of Madness in the Modern Age: Derision and Mask in the Discourse of the Power

**483** GNACIO JOSÉ LÓPEZ HERNÁNDEZ  
Spanish Military Engineers and the Real Junta de Fomento at the Island of Cuba. Public Works between 1832 and 1834

**509** NOELIA FERNÁNDEZ GARCÍA  
The Rebuilding Task of Francisco Somolinos in Langreo, Asturias: The Parish Church of Santiago Apostol

**531** ROCÍO GARRIGA INAREJOS  
Espacio  
Resonant Spaces: From the Soundscapes of the Trenches to the Hearing of Silence in Alfonso Reyes and John Cage

## Reseñas · Book Review

**551** JOSE ANTONIO VIGARA ZAFRA  
Vigo Trasanco, Alfredo: *La ciudad y la mirada del artista. Visiones desde el Atlántico*. Santiago de Compostela, Teófilo, 2014.

**555** JESÚS ÁNGEL SÁNCHEZ GARCÍA  
Alonso Pereira, José Ramón (dir.): *Modernidad y contemporaneidad en la arquitectura de Galicia*. Universidad de La Coruña, La Coruña, 2012.

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Gimeno, María y Collazos, Raquel (coord.): *Paradores de Turismo*. La colección artística. Madrid, Paradores de Turismo, Fundación Mapfre, 2015.