

Ori Gersht: The Pursuit of the Concealed or Photography as Autobiography

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I thought the best line to take was to act as if nothing had happened, minimise the importance of what they might have found out. So I hastened to expose, in full view, a sign on which I had written simply: WHAT OF IT? If up in the galaxy they had thought they would embarrass me with their I SAW YOU, my calm would disconcert them, and they would be convinced there was no point in dwelling on that episode. If, at the same time, they didn't have much information against me, a vague expression like WHAT OF IT? would be useful as a feeler, to see how seriously I should take their affirmation I SAW YOU. The distance separating us (from its dock of a hundred million light-years the galaxy had called a million centuries before, journeying into the darkness) would perhaps make it less obvious that my WHAT OF IT? was replying to their I SAW YOU of two hundred million years before, but it didn't seem wise to include more explicit references in the new sign, because if the memory of that day, after three million centuries, was becoming dim, I certainly didn't want to be the one to refresh it.

Italo Calvino, *Cosmocomics*

Ori Gersht's photographic journeys extend across various vistas of Israel, where he was born, to the country of his true initiation, England, which serves him as a point of departure to the very heart of Europe: Germany, Sarajevo, Poland. These places are his camera's field of action, but not necessarily the subjects of his photographs. The geographical sites constitute focuses of viewing for something else that charges these sights with deep sediments, both private and collective, which accord these works the

secret of their power and their poetic wondrousness.

The Place

Gersht was born in Tel Aviv, a relatively young Mediterranean city that was founded in 1909 but bears within it, as an organic part of itself, the ancient mother-city of Jaffa, founded in pre-historic times. It may be that already there, in the landscapes of his childhood, the inexhaustible gap between present and past – a gap that recurs in his works – was formed. A place of shelter during his adolescence, Gersht confesses, is connected to the gaze that turns from the city he grew up in to the expanses of the sea – there, from the heights of the old lighthouse of the disused port, at the point where the Yarkon flows into the Mediterranean Sea.

I would say that on the background of the social-national climate of the 1970s, to turn to the sea required a great sense of freedom, and even much daring: in Israel at that time the sea still represented what lay beyond it – a cruel diasporic world, to which the collective memory of Israeli society refused to return. Refraining from a gaze towards the sea characterised the artists of 'New Horizons', the most important avant-garde movement in Israeli art of the period following the establishment of the State, and this matter has already been extensively discussed. I will mention only that of the hundreds of watercolours depicting the city of Tel Aviv painted by Yosef Zaritsky, who was the leading force of 'New Horizons', not one related to the sea; Zaritsky frequently painted with his back to the sea, with his gaze directed to the heart of the city or to the hills behind it (such as Napoleon's Hill in Ramat Gan). The turning of the gaze away from the sea characterises not only the Israeli culture of the first decades of statehood, but perhaps also the following years, as possibly reflected in the words of the refrain 'With my back to the sea' in Meir Ariel's song from 1988 sung by Gidi Gov.

Ori Gersht's move outward to the sea, at first from the heights of the lighthouse in Tel Aviv Port and later in surfing excursions and nocturnal bathings, recalls Rony Someck, a distinctive Tel Aviv poet, whose poem *Night Swimming*, 1987, speaks of an experience that simultaneously attracts and repels:

only the smell of the salt and the energy of the easy chairs / and the blue that never / explodes. / No-one says that there are too many / breakwaters in this sea, / nor even a solitary sail and with difficulty a horizon, and only the receding whiteness / is like the fingernails of this female who drowns a conflict in a frothy / kilometre / of night swimming.

Another place of refuge for Gersht as an adolescent was the Paris Cinema, which was owned by his parents, and allowed him almost unconditional viewing of the enchanted and distant world of the celluloid. The Paris Cinema used to show classics of film history, and its 'Midnight Movies' were a highly regarded Tel Aviv institution. In this cinema hall, at times through the small window of the projection room where he sat next to the projectionist, Gersht saw films such as *The Rocky Horror Show* or, contrastingly, Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, and there he first became acquainted with the masterpieces of the great film directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Jean Luc Godard. This was of course before the era of video, so in order to see all the films he wanted to see, Gersht organised his social encounters with the screening times in mind. In the dark cinema hall, isolated within himself, Gersht began to weave an alternative world to the routine world of everyday. The transitory figures that appeared and disappeared, and the soundtrack whose meaning he could not understand but whose musicality he registered very well, left much space for his fertile imagination; his sensitivity played simultaneously with close and direct involvement and with distanced and anonymous viewing. A self-distancing from the sights of the city, and a search for other landscapes in which it is possible to hide, to vanish and become assimilated but also to discover, constitute a point of departure for each one of Gersht's photographed landscapes.

During his military service, which also involved transitions from one place to another, Gersht served in a small unit that operated as a 'nationwide squad' of the Medical Corps. His task was to instruct army units scattered all around the country on how to defend oneself against chemical warfare; the 'nomadic' character of his task, which by its nature was based on brief and dissociated encounters which did not foster a sense of home or belonging, evidently suited Gersht's needs. Taking all this into

account, one is not surprised by his quick decision, made immediately after his release from the I.D.F. and a visit to England, to settle in London; then too he decided to engage in photography. About his choice of London, Gersht says: 'It's so big and so anonymous, a place where you don't know anyone, and you can disappear in it.' Refuge in the metropolis helped him to free himself from the sense of suffocation in the Israeli environment, where 'every action immediately becomes a public issue and the whole society's business'. Indeed, in the first photographs that he created in London during his studies, the sights are distanced and anonymous urban landscapes. The city is captured in long exposures from his 14th-storey apartment, done mostly in the night hours and focused principally on the infinite sky, and only at the edge of the frame do the tops of the city's buildings peep up. The city's lifelines are summed up only in distant traces of its lights and in the flashes of the aeroplanes passing through the expanses of its sky.

The Time

Gersht was born, as already stated, in the first Hebrew city, which, though a relatively young city, has known the upheavals of history in the course of three periods, each of which separately and all of which together have contributed to a sensation that is very close to the way Alberto Giacometti described his 1932 sculpture *The Palace at 4 a.m.*: 'half of it is built and half of it destroyed'. The first period ended with the conclusion of the Ottoman regime in Palestine, in 1917. At that time the city's founders sought to liberate themselves from the Oriental character of Old Jaffa, and to design a new and modern garden neighbourhood which they thought of as a 'White City'. The second period coincides with the duration of the British mandate, 1917–48, during which the city grew and expanded and after the Second World War absorbed survivors from Europe – among them architects who built Tel Aviv and transformed it into one of the important cities in the world in the sphere of Bauhaus architecture. The third period, which began with the establishment of the State in 1948, has placed Tel Aviv at the center of Israel's cultural and economic life. In the 1960s, the decade in which Gersht was born (5 March 1967), high-rise buildings were already appearing in the city: the

Shalom Tower, Tel Aviv's first skyscraper, had already been built, and a row of high-rise hotels had already been erected on the shoreline. In the stifling and imprisoning density within which the child Gersht grew up, he and his little sister found refuge for many hours among the wild vegetation that could still be seen in the more northern sections of the city (where Pinkas Street met the Haifa Road). On his return from this innocent excursion from this city 'jungle', it turned out that the police had been looking for him, and indeed his worried mother did not spare him a lesson.

The period of Gersht's childhood and adolescence is bounded by four wars: he was born three months before June 1967 – the Six-Day War. From this war he recalls only his mother's stories; she sought to protect him but also transmitted to him a great anxiety. When he was six, in October 1973, the hardest war since the War of Independence took place in Israel: the Yom Kippur War. Gersht recalls the absence of his father, who served next to the Egyptian border, as long weeks of exhausting waiting for him to return home; at this time his father survived an attack by Egyptian commandoes while he was on guard at his post on the Egyptian border – an event that was perceived as a moment of heroism combined with a miracle. For Gersht, the memory of his father's return from the battles in Sinai, with his dusty army uniform, his thick beard, and his Egyptian Kalachnikov rifle, was one of the formative experiences of his childhood. To this was added the sense of failure and mistaken conception that accompanied this war, and the subsequent protest and political reversal. He clearly remembers the school excursions to the country's borders, and the games of sticking a hand or a foot beyond the fence so as to be 'outside the country'. 'Actually', Gersht claims, 'at that time it was almost impossible to go outside the country's borders, and all that remained was to play at 'make-believe' or to dream'. In June 1982, the security tension in the north of the country led to the Lebanon War.

Gersht's period of military service passed in relative quiet, as already noted; but in 1987 the Palestinian popular uprising in the Territories began – the first Intifada; a year later Gersht decided to travel abroad and to study photography at the University of Westminster). In 1989 he began studying in England, but the wars in Israel did not cease. He experienced the Gulf War of 1991 in London, on the television screen,

watching CNN, which at times anticipated the Israeli media in giving information about what was happening in Israel. Indeed, in one of the CNN reports on the Scud bombardments he identified the street in which a shell had fallen, not far from Shikun Vatikim in Ramat Gan, where his parents lived; in Israel at the same time the report was embargoed so as not to assist Saddam Hussein with information about the location of the hit.

The tension-filled life in this country and the unresolved relations between Israel and her neighbours have a direct connection to the upheavals and changes in the years when Gersht was maturing, just as the influence of these factors on our lives here is still too early to sum up.

The Quest for Another Place and Another Time

Gersht's photography gives expression to an attempt to bridge a history full of traumas and unforgivable human acts, and a profound longing for the unseen and concealed human, that waits for a moment of grace in which it can be exposed. In the *Afterwards* series, 1998, in which he relates to post-war Sarajevo, and in the *White Noise* series, 1999, which was photographed in the course of a train journey to Auschwitz, Gersht photographed charged regions that designate catastrophes and fill those who look at them today with dread and pain.

The horror of desolation is made perceptible in the photographs of the high-rise apartment buildings in Sarajevo, in spite of the superficial appearance of the open and colourful facades. After the shelling the buildings remained almost completely empty of their occupants, and the camera lens has registered the buildings as huge backdrops scored and pocked with shell-holes, their powerful impression stemming from their being a screen for lives that have become stilled. In one of the exceptional photographs in this series we see a huge panorama in which a mass of people gather together close to a swimming pool, as though wanting to celebrate some ritual of bathing, or perhaps seeking a moment of relief from a situation that the open landscape actually covers.

In the *White Noise* series there is almost no hint of any particular place, and the

bluish greyness that predominates in the landscapes photographed through a window of the train travelling to the extermination camp documents time, which erases all traces. The silence is thunderous and the tranquillity screams out about a memory that is dissolving. In one of the images of the series, a tall slender tree, which has been cut at its centre in the transition from one frame to the next, stands like an icon, and only the combination of its two parts represents its full stature. At the bottom of the lower frame, captured like threads of fine, disintegrating lace, are the fenceposts of the extermination camp Birkenau. The title of this impressive photograph is *Don't Look Back*. The interdiction against looking backwards towards the place of the catastrophe alludes both to the biblical story of Lot's wife and the ruins of Sodom: 'And He said: Flee for your life, do not look behind you ... And Lot's wife looked behind her and became a pillar of salt' (Genesis 19:17, 26), and to words from the diary of one of a group of survivors who were the first to escape from the extermination camp. Gersht sets up his camera in a place where the escapees stood, and for a moment the hard words from a poem by Bialik come to his mind: 'The sun shone, the acacia bloomed, and the slaughterer slaughtered'. Nonetheless, Gersht's power really lies in his absolute dissociation from any text whatsoever, and in his placing before the viewer a focused sight which rises up like a silent witness that says with full power what thousands of witnesses could not say.

Another group of works that I would like to refer to in this brief survey is interesting in its choice of landscapes: of all the landscapes in Israel, Gersht has chosen to photograph the expanses of the desert. Sojourning in places of profound silences has always fascinated him; the infinite expanses of the desert enable him to create a more continuous flow in time: 'A day or two in the desert', he says, 'create an equilibrium of time. The days pass without our being able to separate them...'. Here and there we may find scars in the landscape, tracks of vehicles or human footsteps, but the main power of these landscapes is in their anonymity, by dint of which Gersht moves with his camera without any of the 'distraction effected by historic specificity and local identity fixed in defined moments of time. In Romantic terms one may speak of a time that is beyond physical time, that makes possible an accumulation

and an augmentation of a sense of place and time whose character is the expanses of eternity. Solitude enables communion, which accords openness and dedication to the longing.

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