

POSTMORTEM

TIME AND SPACE IN THE WORKS OF MICHAL TOBIASS

Shlomit Breuer

I put a picture up on a wall. Then I forget there is a wall. I no longer know what there is behind this wall, I no longer know there is a wall, I no longer know this wall is a wall, I no longer know what a wall is.

— Georges Perec, **Species and Spaces and Other Pieces**,
translated from the French by John Sturrock

A postmortem action, be it real or ideational, an autopsy or a requiem, always takes place in a vacuum and is formulated after the fact; its essence derives from what was, and its realization is based on what has remained.

Michal Tobias takes pictures of exposed museum and gallery walls between exhibitions. Suspending for a moment the short span of time between the physical presence of an exhibition and the complete disappearance of its traces, she creates a thought-provoking documentation of time and space. Her action sways between a major, “real,” bygone event and a future, “real,” occurrence and takes place within a narrow time slot, the time

of in-between-exhibitions, of exposed walls, so alien to active display spaces, which are therefore hurriedly and feverishly re-covered.

From the emptied spaces, Tobiass extracts through her photographs an additional variable beside the temporal one – the wall; the wall we tend to pass by without paying heed to its presence, essence and various meanings. In her works, this static load bearing, demarcating, separating, and navigating architectural element is exposed and assumes centrality specifically at a time in which it's bereft of its particular designated function and thus ostensibly rendered irrelevant. To the walls' inherent historical, cultural and political sediments, she adds backstage activities, which bring to the fore practices such as hanging and installing that are – like the walls themselves – hidden from the beholder through befitting display procedures.

Tobiass's interest in themes relating to deconstruction, witnessing and memory has led her to focus on exhibitions that delve into these topics. Thus, for example, about four decades after the publication of obituary notices announcing his premature death, Tobiass joins the chronological illusion created by Gideon Gechtman in 1975. To the postmortem continuum, whose literal meaning is disrupted as it blends together the end and the beginning, she adds photographs of traces left by Gechtman's works on the walls of the Israel Museum after the dismantling of his 2014 posthumous retrospective exhibition curated by Aya Miron. The mausoleum layout, which according to Gechtman he had created as an organic work in constant process

without a predetermined end, is now being “broken into” and its tiers are supplemented with remnants of the work of installation and the a view of the worn out wall. These third-hand phantom remainders reverberate with both Gechtman’s actual work of art and the indeterminacy he had ascribed to its future after his demise.

Emptying a museum of its exhibits not only undermines its purpose as a display space, but, in the absence of ambient noises, also emphasizes its architectural structure. This structure, which like places of worship is characterized by architectural depth and dominates the walking direction and rhythm of the worshippers/spectators – traits borrowed by Gechtman in the construction and conceptualization of his mausoleum layout while creating a mausoleum within a mausoleum – reinforces the perception of the museum as a secular temple, the fetishistic nature of its exhibits and its function as a “meditative necropolis” in the words of Merleau-Ponty.

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On the walls of the new venue of Basis Gallery, Michal Tobias displays walls of other, much older, spaces. Double estrangement is embedded in her action – that of an object severed from its environment and functional context and transferred by an act of art from one space to another. Like a multilayered palimpsest (a manuscript recycled for functional-economic reasons by effacing an earlier text and making room for a new one) in which later additions are non-hierarchically superimposed on the erased text,

Tobiass's photographed exhibition traces serve as an archive of the local cultural-hegemonic canon and offer a rereading of its history. In this reading, traces of past exhibitions resurface on museum walls and more than attesting to what is present, they emphasize what is missing, absent, or even excluded.