The Room of the Son and the Daughter
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I began writing about Liat Elbling's Interactions feeling quite certain about what I find interesting in the works and what the key to deciphering them would be. However, as I got into explaining Elbling's relevance to contemporary photography theory, a nagging question came to mind that seemed somewhat alien to the kind of theoretical discourse I was trying to create. The question, however, would not go away and while not knowing precisely how to articulate it in a way that made it relevant, I just couldn't let it drop.

My point of departure had initially been Elbling's sophisticated way of dealing with what could be called "the complex condition of the eye" in the field of the digital image. More specifically, what prompted my thinking was the realization that Elbling's photographs are just the tip of an iceberg, that they hide a significant photographic process that is difficult to see as long as we focus on the completed and framed image. This multiphase process begins with the construction of three-dimensional models which Elbling then photographs. These are the beautiful, empty and anonymous architectonic "environments" that generally open up to the gaze through a central architectural or geometric element–a column, a cube, a portico, an arch–whose meticulous lighting and coloring are all part of a dynamic system of relationships. The revealed spaces are not fully abstract because they always contain a remote allusion to some functional form or a sketchy life-form. But neither do they ever become real places; they only hint at a direction, a rudimentary scheme for the possibility of a future place.

Photographing these construed spaces is (usually) just a step in the process. The photo is returned to a three-dimensional environment in which it becomes part of a second round of photographs that will ultimately be framed or partially framed. The very act of framing reinserts the material and the three-dimensional into the space of the image, thereby underscoring the existence of an unresolved and incomplete dialectic between the photographed reality and the many levels of the real that a photograph can sustain. What is surprising in Elbling's works is the way in which a process that is entirely based on the mechanism of repetition, reproduction and reframing can nevertheless contain possibilities that not only increase in number but that actually acquire a life of their own–somewhat like a splitting cell or a sample in music that unexpectedly echoes rhythms and frequencies that were not there before.

Much has changed since the transition to digital photography a quarter of a century ago. If in the 1990s and early aughts, photography was busy digesting the meaning of the loss, or the seeming loss, of the index–and with it the natural continuum that connected the world through light, film and the developed picture–today the question of photography finds itself in a completely different setting. In Elbling's work, there is no longing for a lost and unmediated connection to the real, but there is also no echo of the opposite claim that photography is always only a construction and never directly tracks reality.

For Elbling, there is no room for the debate about the index because her photography is indifferent to the predominant dichotomy between real presence and representation. Whereas indifference, in this context, generally marks a wholesale acceptance of photography as construction, Elbling's works actually suggest the opposite. From their standpoint, there is no essential difference between what is

present outside the picture and what is represented within the picture. Alternatively, the modes of the image, including the digital one, are always already part of the real space of appearances, part of a spectrum of reality-in-motion that constantly produces new differences between and within the modes of presence of what is visible to the eye. When Elbling shows (as she does in this book) the framed photographs hanging on a wall in a gallery, or her built models surrounded by cameras and lighting in her studio, or the images that appear on the computer screen on her desk, she is not only giving us an anecdotal glimpse into the "behind the scenes" of her work. In these photographs, she offers a reminder that the image never appears in itself, alone; that observing an image always requires reference to the space from which it originates and in which its life as an image is conducted. What the eye is accustomed to framing will always remain fragmentary and it will conceal the "conditions of the image's appearance" that are, in fact, the subject of Elbling's work.

Elbling explores the space in which the digital image comes into being. Her works, too, are primarily preoccupied with the modes of space and only then present the various objects that appear as part of this or that space. Her spaces invite the eye to enter and wander through them, but they also quickly frustrate the eye's natural curiosity. The eye wants to continue to meander but it is compelled to stop by an impenetrable barrier. The obstacle is surprising because it is transparent. It originates in an aesthetic regimentation of the space, meticulous in its cleanliness of form and assertive control of the complete contents of the visual field. These gradually make clear to the eye that it cannot inhabit the spaces in front of it or find life in them. While wandering, the eye senses the lack of oxygen. It is drawn to the colorful and geometric forms of beauty, but it ultimately needs to disengage before it suffocates. It took me some time to become aware of this effect of being asphyxiated, which is crucial, I now see, for accounting for the works. It explains, for example, why it would be wrong to understand Elbling's photographs as a display of a mannered and stylized design. The works may perhaps be obsessive and push the perfection of design to its limit, but their meticulousness is not just a matter of elegance as much as the evocation of a deep anxiety about disorder and entropy.

What is happening there in Elbling's precisely controlled spaces? How should we understand their uncompromising cleanliness? Is it the void, or perhaps death, that is blowing through them, reminding us that space (in Hebrew, hallal) is never simply a continuous expanse that lends itself to inhabitation but also, at the same time, a vacuum, a blankness, a lacuna. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that in Hebrew, the word hallal is also used to denote a fallen soldier, lost in battle.

The issue becomes clearer when we recall that Elbling's earlier works reflect quite a different existential attitude. I'm looking, for example, at photos of what appears to be a shared rental apartment (in Tel Aviv). A view of a corridor, white walls, sesame-colored floor-tiles: Elbling crosses the space quickly and enters a room, naked. pp. 22-23 Or photographs of the messy kitchen: sink overflowing, unwashed dishes, bottles, coffee cups, scraps of food on the counter. In the spaces Elbling has been presenting in recent years, the very idea of leftovers is unimaginable. The difference, of course, does not lie in the leftovers, but rather in the pulse of life, the sense of experience that resonates so clearly in the early works. Perhaps, above all, the difference can be found in the presence and location of desire. I look again at these Kitchen photographs: standing at the sink, wearing only a tank top, Elbling is holding a bouquet of yellow flowers. She inhales their scent, while between her legs dangles a big black dildo.p.

Or, for example, the series of photographs called Bubble & Squeak in which Elbling carries out a visual experiment that uses the everyday genre of family photographs or photographs of couples. Elbling (then in her late twenties) is photographed hugging older men against a variety of backgrounds: outdoors in nature, at the beach, at the zoo, in a field, at home, on a bike ride, next to an ice cream parlor, next to a pizzeria with a slice in her hand. Whether we call this Oedipus or Electra, the point is that despite the irony and sense of a controlled experiment, it is the dynamis of desire that activates the space of the image.

Therefore, when I meet Elbling to talk, I come prepared with a question that seems simple to me: Where is your desire in Interactions? What happens to desire? What kind of form does it take in these construed spaces? But, as I should have known, this question doesn't really lead anywhere. The conversation wends its way back to questions about architecture and houses, open and closed spaces, and finally about different kinds of rooms in houses, especially rooms that were meaningful in earlier moments in life, like a childhood or parents' bedroom. Elbling tells about her parents' home in Ra'anana, where an empty room separated her and her sister's bedrooms. For years, this empty room was used as a kind of storage place. It was called "the son's room"–a name that jokingly, or half-jokingly, signaled her parents' (or maybe her father's) unfulfilled yearning for a male child. Elbling talks about the little girl who internalized the need to fulfill the role of a son, to fill the void. "It's funny, I even looked a bit like a boy."

At one point, as a teenager, the desire to turn the boy's room into her own becomes unbearable and she manages to convince her father to join the two rooms together. An architect is hired, sketches are hung on the wall, and the happy day arrives on which she sees her father with a giant hammer in hand, breaking down the wall separating the two rooms. Disappointingly, the promise associated with this moment is deceptive. For various reasons, the creation of the new space never materializes and for the next few years, a half-destroyed wall separates and connects the son's room to Elbling's bedroom.

Following our conversation, Elbling emails me photographs of her parents' house, among which are pictures of the son's room. During her years in art school, she would sneak back to the house and take pictures while her parents were out. A police photographer returning to the crime scene. The photographs are in black and white, seemingly neutral and factual, but facticity is always a heavy burden.p. 29

Her childhood home awaits her, empty of people. It is spacious but the rooms appear neglected. Elbling faces the functional objects and artifacts piled up in them, indicative of worn-out patterns of order and disjointed forms of meaning. Her photographic interaction with her parents' home is quite different from the construction of these flawless elegant spaces in her recent Interactions. Yet, despite this profound difference, the eye that looks at these black-and-white photographs of Elbling's childhood home also realizes very quickly that it cannot stay in these rooms for long. The circumstances are indeed completely different, but here, too, the oxygen in the depicted spaces is thin.p. 29

Recently, after her parents' death, Elbling returned to photograph in her childhood home. The house had been cleaned up and renovated, and in place of the broken wall, a drywall had been installed. But this time the reason for photographing was functional. She sends me these color images as attachments to an email in which she writes: "These were pictures we had to have, my sister and I, to place a rental listing for the apartment."

I go back to looking at the ultraclean controlled spaces in Interactions and Proposals for Disorder. Am I hallucinating when I see in them corners from her parents' house?

Art cannot be reduced to psychoanalytic explanations. Yet, is it possible to forget what is "found" in the son's room? The family's black hole, the void of a space that takes the form of a male child in between two sisters and with it the gender elasticity, girlboy boygirl? The desire to change the house's order and have a room of her own? A father's unfulfilled promise? A breach that was never repaired? A life within and between ruins?

Instead of answering these questions, something else becomes clear to me: Something fundamental has changed in my attitude toward the photographs of Interactions. Now, I see in them a dimension of animation I did not see before. What at first seemed to be stylized, refined and frozen now seems to me to belong to the beating heart of life. What life? Human life; a life filled with empty spaces, holes and voids, and experienced as a daily struggle with unbearable pain or with a suffering that sometimes manages to sidestep hurt via repression and disconnection. This is the kind of life in which you construct rooms that can be arranged and repeatedly rearranged, and where you can imagine and also forget.

I did not see this at first, and now I do. But this is not because these dimensions were hidden within the spaces of Interactions. No; in fact, nothing was concealed. Elbling's photography always takes place and operates between two poles. That's how it is with photography whose presentation of the visible is always bound up with the ways it opens up for us the invisible.

And one final thought:

The concept of the room is essential to the history and imagination of emotions. The heart has rooms or chambers, and the thinking and feeling subject has the chambers of her heart, where her innermost thoughts and feelings reside. The concept of the room is also essential for the history and imagination of photography. From camera obscura to film camera, the image, like the human subject, needed a protected room of its own in order to be born and develop amid the light. What has happened to this room in the age of the digital image? Are rooms still part of a subjectivity that has become digital?