Liat Elbling: Attacks on Photography
Ron Bartos

"One witness shall not rise up against any man, whatsoever the sin or wickedness be: but in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall stand."

- Book of Deuteronomy, 19:15

Liat Elbling is among the most original voices in today's local photography scene. She has an exceptionally developed aesthetic sense, and in recent years, her exhibitions have displayed intense, astutely composed photographs that convey a deeply insightful conceptual outlook and earned her the 2011 Constantiner Photography Award from the Tel Aviv Museum, which also hosted an exhibition of her work.[1] Her photographs frequently place the medium of photography and the photographer herself in the witness stand, where this medium is explored and examined while the photographer is required to provide testimony.

The above-cited quotation, borrowed from the Jewish Law of Halakhah regarding the provision of testimony, holds that the testimony of a single individual is not considered credible and that two (or more) witnesses are necessary to establish trustworthy testimony. The camera, as we know, is a means of capturing the appearance of reality and documenting it. As such, the photograph is subservient to reality and serves as evidence thereof. If the camera documents evidence and the photograph is the evidence, then the photographer, Elbling, is the witness. However, she is only one witness, and according to the Halakhic approach, we must view her testimony–that is, her photographs–with skepticism. In this context, our doubt leads us to engage in an inquiry regarding the photographs of the photographer-witness and to contemplate the photography itself.

It is instructive to begin our discussion with the work "Blue & Green" (2011) which is essentially a minimalist statement of intent to conduct an attack on photography in the name of Elbling's entire body of work. This creation is composed of two horizontal fields of color, the upper one blue and light blue in color and the other deep green, creating a razor-sharp horizontal line between the two. The work presents a concise landscape of sky and earth that has been completely condensed. The two fields of color have a shining, multi-colored appearance and overall look and texture that simulate the visibility contained in a digital photograph. However, it is not at all a photograph. The work is composed of two pieces of colored glass that have been fused using intense heat and enclosed in a wooden frame. This sculptural object emerged from contemplating the medium of photography and from the intent to imitate its visibility, thereby challenging the very act of looking at a photograph and the extent of visual preconceptions (presuming before seeing) that are inherent in the eyes of the viewer.

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[1] The artist Ilit Azoulay also received this award in the same year, and the two women participated in a joint exhibition at the Museum.

A similar effort was made through another sculptural creation, "No Doubt There Is Any Doubt" (2011), which distances itself from photography in order to contemplate its essence. This is a wall hanging composed of two pairs of stone pieces (Caesarstone and granite marble) in shades of gray, connected so as to form a thin like (as in "Blue & Green"), like the skyline of a horizon. The pair of landscapes is obscured by two partially transparent tablets of acrylic glass (frosted Plexiglas) situated about 4 cm in front of them. The tablets blur the view of the stone pieces located behind them, giving them the appearance of unfocused landscapes. The two compositions bring to mind previous condensed landscapes from the history of art, such as the abstract paintings of Mark Rothko which pose a heavenly element against an earthly element, or the ascetic sea photographs of the Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto. Nonetheless, one should not dwell on such associations because the value of Elbling's creations lies not in the landscape itself but rather, in the "test of photographic visibility" presented to the viewer. Elbling's creative work relies on her audience's preconceived pastoral perception, a perception that draws the viewer towards the familiar. Accordingly, one must resist the visual appearance and challenge the photographic appearance–that is, the photographic visibility of the object–in order to identify its components and recognize that it adopts an analytical and thoughtful stance in relation to photography. The objectification of photography manifest in these works, which is even more salient in other works of this artist, will be discussed later in this article.

Two photographs also used landscapes to make their point. Both "Hermon" (2009) and "Portrait of a Cloud" (2009) portray typical, pastoral landscapes of the Israeli countryside: the first presents a tractor amidst brown, ochre and green tracts of land, with a snow-capped image of Mount Hermon in the background. The second photograph (bearing an unusual name) portrays a landscape with a tract of earth in the foreground, a row of bushes and trees in the background, and a strip of blue skies with a whitish cloud above them. The photographer took advantage of the "simplicity" of the image in order to apply her machinations to it, in the same way that cubism, for example, returned to its fundamental subject matter (primarily still lifes of nature but also portraits and a few landscapes) in the early twentieth century, in order to pursue the artistic, formalistic ideal that it had set for itself.[2] Returning to the fundamentals thus enables the artist as well as the viewer to think differently about the subject matter. Elbling chose the local landscape but her photographs do not disclose what indeed the landscape looks like, and the question of what happened to the landscapes remains. The answer is simple: They do not exist. In other words, there is no place from which the landscape depicted in the photographs exists. Mount Hermon can never overlook these tracts of land as were actually photographed in the vicinity of Jerusalem. The artist combined landscapes from three different locations and, using a computerized synthesis, integrated them to generate a single panorama comprising various levels of landscape–a panorama that does not actually exist.

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[2] Cubism, for its part, sought to capture the essence of the object in a single glance and to overcome the limitations of space and time. Towards this end, it adopted a "simultaneity of viewpoints" to portray its object from a variety of angles simultaneously.

In this way, the photographer appears to be an unreliable agent of reality or of history (and even a dangerous one, according to the Platonic definition of the artist as imitator) whose testimony is a lie. The falsified photographs undermine the immutability of the photograph's image, which is perceived as representing a depiction of reality that is as reliable as vision itself. For, indeed, the camera and the eye function in similar ways: both capture and react in accordance with their sensitivity to light. The camera, however, is also capable of isolating and preserving an image out of a stream of reality.[3] The photograph as a remnant of reality, as its death mask (in the words of Susan Sontag), is hereby undermined. Moreover, because of the credibility attributed to a photograph, its fraudulence alters reality in the context of perception.[4] The baseless reality that does not, in fact, exist is authoritatively substantiated by the medium, by the photograph that documents it, because if something is documented that means it existed. As a corollary, sight also comes under attack through Elbling's creations. This form of attack is familiar to Israeli art from the creations of Buky Schwartz, who from the late 1960s engaged almost exclusively in ways of seeing and in challenging them.

The influence of photography on reality gains momentum and is actualized in a series of five photographs titled "For Each Time I Wanted to Leave" (2011). These are photographs of flowers in which the artist's highly developed aesthetic sense, which guides the photographs' compositions, stands out. The title of the series reveals her secret and simultaneously recalls the children's ritual of tearing out flower petals while alternately reciting "he loves me" and "he loves me not" until the final petal provides the fateful answer. The photographs rely on the process by which they were created during which the artist tore out petals and dismembered flowers of various sorts, reducing them to their components. She then used glue to attach the various parts of the flowers (petals, stem leaves, stems, blooms, and so on) so as to form a new flower. For each flower a vase, a fitting background, and an appropriate color scheme were carefully chosen, and these are depicted in the final photograph. For example, the photograph "For Each Time I Wanted to Leave #6" portrays two long stems capped by the flower of the Calla Lily. From the calyx of the flower emerges a baby corn that replaces the spadix (the phallic part) of the flower. The two flowers are placed in a pink porcelain decorative vase against a background that looks like the corner of a room painted in pink, white, and beige. Unlike the landscapes in which she combined separate realities to create a fake photograph, in this series, the artist creates a fake version of a familiar reality and makes use of straightforward photography. Elbling maintains her own discourse regarding the credibility of photography, and she demonstrates two possibilities for confronting aesthetics with ethics: a fake testimony regarding real occurrences or an accurate testimony regarding fake occurrences.

Elbling continues to challenge the credibility of the photograph in the series "Holes" (2011), which comprises four photographs of decorative plates against decorative backgrounds. Here, too, the visibility of the photographs aims to achieve a high degree of aesthetic congruence in

[3] John Berger, "Beyond the Camera's Shot: On the Likelihood of Contextual Photography," *About Looking* (Tel Aviv: Pitom, 2012), p. 56 [Hebrew version, translated from English].

[4] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Po'alim, Am 'Oved, 1979), p. 89 [Hebrew version, translated from English].

the formal sense: colorfulness, relation to background objects and symmetry of the composition. It has been argued in the "counter-interrogation" of the photograph with which we are dealing–and each case indeed proves this–that there is more than meets the eye in the artist's various creations. We will therefore have to investigate the meaning of the holes in the current series, and towards this end we will use a representative photograph: "Holes #1." This image depicts a white porcelain plate decorated with a garland of flowers drawn in its center, resting on a tablecloth embroidered with images of wreaths of flowers. The photograph is very elegant, symmetric and meticulous, and was created as follows: Elbling photographed the plate from a frontal view. She then printed the photograph and cut out the image of the plate along its contours. After that, she carved holes into the printed, cutout image of the plate along the lines of the decorations adorning the real plate. At this stage, there remained a printout with cutouts matching the images on the plate. This printout was then placed on another printout with the image of an embroidered tablecloth, in such a manner that a small gap remained between the two, and a shadow was cast between the two pieces of paper (the plate and the map). This installation was then photographed frontally, creating the final photograph. In fact, it is a photograph of a printout resting on another printout–paper on paper–with the illusion of depth created between their two-dimensional contours. The only clue regarding the "paperness" of the plate is provided in the title of the series–"Holes"–and a close look at the finish of the holes, which were made with a knife, will then reveal that it is a work of paper.

The secret of Elbling's photographs lies in the great effort invested in concealing the actions and manipulations to which the photographed objects are subjected. Whether through physical or digital manipulations, this effort is what generates their unique value. The photographer is attacking photography as well as the act of looking at it and the way it is perceived. In general, it seems that if the photograph is "natural" that is, straightforward and untreated, then the reality as photographed is unusual, and if the photograph has been treated, then it seeks to imitate a straightforward photograph. In any event, one must adopt a policy of "respect it but suspect it" when confronting an Elbling photograph.

Let us now return to the issue of objectification of the photograph, which was mentioned above. The act of objectification (transformation into an object) as applied to the photograph adds to the artist's contemplation of the medium. Up to this point, Elbling has cut across the internal boundaries of the photograph, whereas in her objectified photographs, she traverses its external boundaries. These are photographic-sculptural creations not in the sense of photosculptures along the lines of works by artists, such as the German-American, Oliver Herring, the Canadian, Susy Oliveira, or the Korean, Gwon Osang all who create three-dimensional sculptures covered with pictures of pieces of an object which then combine to form the composition. Rather, they can more accurately be described as "photobjects" (a new definition we propose), that is, photographs that have undergone material swelling so that they acquired volume, formed a "body" and grew extensions that reach beyond the familiar boundaries. The photograph is a non-material medium of a meager and limited form, especially

in relation to other media,[5] and the objectification appears to compensate for the inadequate nature of the medium inherent in photography as a creative medium.

Let us outline the contours of Elbling's creations in which photography is emptied of its materiality and then increasingly acquires materiality until its material form overflows. A core series of photographs by the artist ("Untitled," 2008-2010) depicts private homes and structures. These were photographed and then digitally processed so that their various entryways were blocked and removed from context: windows and doors were sealed or copied to other locations, and the houses themselves were even transplanted to foreign landscapes or artificial backgrounds. The structures that appear in the series were sabotaged and rendered unusable. At the heart of these photographs, of course, is the discourse on which this essay has dwelled so far regarding the visibility of the photograph as well as its values and byproducts. This core series, however, leads us like a main road that diverges into two paths: one heading towards non-materiality and the other towards materiality. The series of houses rely on straightforward photography of the object, its placement within the landscape and its treatment through rich textures and surfaces. One of the photographs (2008) shows a gray house as a sealed cube, surrounded by a lawn, paths, plants and trees, and is facing the sea. The photograph is rich and abundant, as is another photograph in the series from the same year. The latter depicts a nighttime landscape, a pleasant nocturne in which a house rises above a tract of land and trees, against the background of a dark sky lit up by the light of a full moon (it should be noted that the house and trees were photographed during daylight and transplanted into a nighttime setting). Elbling sought to emphasize the material variety that was photographed as much as possible and, in this context, turned to the first path, in which she insisted on removing all signs of materiality from the photograph. Initially she did this by more elaborate treatment of the photographed houses, as in the photograph of a gray structure with a single doorway (2010) which was reduced to the basic visual concepts of perspective and relations of light and dark. At a later stage, however, when a separate series titled "Part A" was presented in a one-person exhibition at the Museum of Israeli art, Ramat-Gan, the photographer extracted various details from the photographs of the structures (a window, a window shade, a pole) and digitally processed them to the fullest extent. The selected detail was adapted, sharpened, and emptied of content until, despite being anchored in reality, it appeared as a three-dimensional digital model. This is the moment at which the material was reduced to nothing and the photograph retains an artificial detail–pseudo-architectural and having a finish of the highest quality, yet superfluous, devoid of function and context. Another photograph, although anomalous in the current series (most of whose elements are seemingly architectural and engineered) is the artist's self-portrait. Like the architectural elements, Elbling's self-portrait receives an impossible finish that is applied to her face which has been processed to the extent possible using a computer and then frozen. The photographs in this series strive to reach a past of hyper-reality, a reality of hyper-visibility and they evade definition as a simulacrum given that their essential element, the core of the works, is securely

[5] Gideon Ofrat, "Photography as Art," *The Artistic Medium* (Tel Aviv: Stavit, 1986), p. 156 [Hebrew].

anchored in actual reality. This, in sum, is the first path photography takes towards the nadir of materiality.

In the second path, as noted, materiality is compounded and even overflows the photograph. The two works discussed at the beginning of this essay, "Blue & Green" and "No Doubt There Is Any Doubt," are composed entirely of material. They are not photographs but, rather, acts of sculpture and placement that imitate photographic visibility. The level of materiality in Elbling's photography first peaked in her one-person exhibition "I'm Coming Home" which was hosted in the gallery Indie in 2011. Elbling created site-specific photographs that depicted the space of the gallery in which they were exhibited, thereby essentially folding the architectural unit into itself. Among the photographs, one stood out in particular: it had only half of a frame, with its left side covered by glass and surrounded by three edges of a frame and with its right side unframed. As such, the photograph was issuing a call to freedom by emerging from its two-dimensional boundaries into the space of the gallery and the world beyond (despite being flat). The increased materiality at the base of the objectification was further amplified in another one-person exhibition titled "Gray Concrete" at the Haifa Museum in 2012, which was based on the purity of the color gray and the aesthetics of concrete.[6] This installation-based exhibition comprised a combination of photography and installations that conveyed thoughts, contemplations, and statements about photography. I would like to single out one photograph, which depicts a gray structure (similar to the photograph mentioned above from the series "Untitled"). It was exhibited bare, unframed, as if it were a flat printout pasted to the wall of the gallery like wallpaper. On top of it and attached to the wall of the gallery was a wooden structural object a few centimeters thick, which was painted the shade of concrete-gray and matched the aesthetic style of the image in the photograph. In terms of medium, however, it appeared as a growth, an external element, beyond the photograph, converting the photographic homogeneity to heterogeneity.

Elbling has broken down the non-materiality of photography and simultaneously questioned some of its other values. The photograph, as we know, is a simulated reproduction and thus suffers from the problem of lack of originality–the loss of its glory.[7] Yet with the attachment of the structural object to the photograph–a work of carpentry tailored to its needs–at least some glory is returned to the photograph. By the same token, the artist overcomes another problem inherent in digital imagery: the digital "state of aggregation." In other words, the digital image is none other than the sharpened and invisible content of the file that contains it, whose data must be decoded (and interpreted) in order to actualize the visual image (printing or projecting the photograph).[8] As such, not only does the photograph not have an "original" origin but this origin is neither accessible nor visible. The wooden form that emerges from the photograph is

[6] This one-person exhibition took place in the context of the project "Alfred Express," part of the exhibit "Haifa-Jerusalem-Tel Aviv" (curator: Ruth Direktor).
[7] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Po'alim, Am 'Oved, 1983), p. 22 [Hebrew version, translated from German].
[8] Boris Groys, "From Image to Image File – and Back: Art in the Age of Digitilization," *Art Power* (Tel Aviv: Pitom, 2009), pp. 93-94 [Hebrew version, translated from English].

akin to a seal of actuality, an authorization of originality and proof of visibility, acting like card-shuffling to generate new thinking about photography.

Thus, we arrive at the stage of summation in the trial of the medium of photography. Elbling has suspended photography as if on a pendulum, a digital-analog axis, a reality-artificiality axis, an axis that swerves between materiality and non-materiality. Elbling's work contemplates fascinating intra-photographic and inter-medium questions while consistently maintaining a stable aesthetic foundation, and most interesting is the photographer's journey along the paths of the photograph's objectification and her use of installation as a different approach to photography. Woe to those accused, in whose trial Elbling's photographs will literally serve as testimony that their deepest, innermost secrets must be explored in order to understand their essence. Only then will we be able to rely on the testimony of the work of Liat Elbling.