There Is No Place that Is Home
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At what moment does a house stop being a house? When the roof is taken off? When the windows are removed? When the walls are knocked down? At what moment does it become a pile of rubble? . . . And then one day the walls of your house finally collapse. If the door is still standing, however, all you have to do is walk through it, and you are back inside. It's pleasant sleeping under the stars. Never mind the rain. It can't last very long.
–Paul Auster, The Invention of Solitude

In the series Homes for America (1966–67), American photographer Dan Graham photographed homes in suburban neighborhoods across America. The work was first exhibited as a twenty-piece slide presentation and then in magazine-like format combining text and image. Both display modes revealed the serial nature of the construction of these neighborhoods and the new suburban aesthetic of postwar America. The work emphasized Graham's comprehensive and typological observation about the new American home in various places across the country.

For years, as part of her ongoing work, Liat Elbling has been wandering around neighborhoods in Israel and photographs them. In the archive that has accrued are photographs of homes built as part of the national Bneh Beitkha (Build Your Home) project.

The project, in which the buyers are given permission to plan their home according to their own personal taste on land sold by the state at a subsidized rate, constituted a significant change in the public construction landscape in Israel. Effectively, the state relinquished its control over a uniform building style. This new method, marketed from the 1960s onward, was increasingly put into practice across the country, from north to south. This method of marketing proved a great success among buyers who were given a creative freedom rarely found in government housing projects. Elbling's series presents Israel's suburbs by looking at the prolific contracting and architectural productivity whose outcome is governed more by individual inspiration than by the aesthetic rules of government building policy. Thus, she confronts bricks with exposed concrete, rough sprayed concrete walls with smooth stone façades, a terrace here, a window, sometimes grass and sometimes, plain earth.

In Homes for America, Graham presents a series of saccharine houses which, when viewed as a whole, resemble play-homes in their bold and harmonious coloring, identical size, and meticulous geometry and order. They almost seem like they came straight off a mass-production line. The observer can barely tell one house from another, let alone a street in one city from one in another. The tranquility of the standardization is jarring. The seriality of the photos intentionally echoes this unease, in which the response to the question "where do you live?" is paralyzing silence. In contrast to the seriality in Graham's photos, Elbling presents a series where the lack of standardization is the seriality. This is especially prominent in the photos of two-family homes. The multiplicity of forms and possibilities for construction, which opens a window onto the personal taste of the Israeli citizen and the question of what the ideal home is for him or her, attest to the infinite meanings of the concept of the home. Both series present the exterior of the home, and in both, the anonymous homes ask what a physical house is and how it should be built, alongside the question of what is the essence of the image of the home.

Regarding the disparity between the habitable home and the humane, the photograph is unable to accommodate guests. Confronted with the images, the viewer puzzles over questions like who lives here, or what is this house? The house turns out to be uncanny.

This alienation is present in many of Elbling's photographs. It seems that in her work, the images of the houses, the architectural structures do not exist as mere photographic objects: she does not use the medium only for the purpose of documentation and registration. Elbling's work shifts from the question about the photographed object to the question about the possibility of photography. The subject of the home is paradigmatic to her activity, and the photographic medium is equally fundamental to it. For her, the photograph resonates more what is not visible in it, the disaffection of what is not discernible to the eye, that which has no image. Thus, the series of photographs of homes presents not only the gap between the dream of the home and its shattering, as it is revealed in the fragile aesthetic of the government project, but also in the limited ability of the photographic act to expose. As opposed to Graham's series, which presents uniformity and serial identity whose quantitative richness alludes to bewilderment regarding the question of the home, Elbling's series presents a continuum where one wall is alien to the one next to it, so that not only do the houses arouse discomfort, but the photograph itself admits to disaffection in that that there will never be a representation of a homogeneous ideal–it will never be perfect.

This notion is reinforced when one examines the series Untitled, 2008-2012, pp. 5, 7-8, 10-13, in which Elbling actively intervened with image-editing software in the possibility and impossibility of the home. Elbling photographed architectural structures and landscapes throughout the country and, through digital processing, added and removed constructive elements. In the process of taking apart and rebuilding, she raised questions about the essence of the home and the way to establish or build one. With a gentle tease, she seems to ask, "what would happen if . . . ," after which immediately follows a sarcastic retort about the normative image of a house and landscape, and the possibility of documenting such a thing.

Whoever takes a longer look might see something absurd in the photographs–a house that is a fortress, without windows or doors, and perhaps this a childish wish that echoes the philosophy underlying the "Build Your Home" project. In these series, any thought about a government housing project, or about a neighborhood, or a country, casts doubt on the "right" or "good" home. Working alongside the image that is revealed to the eye is the standardization created by the photographic act as it appears in Graham's series. But, whereas with Graham, the seriality provokes terror, in Elbling's work the question of the home takes another step in thinking about the possible and the impossible home. She actively creates a living space, and in so doing, presents the struggle with the question about the image in general and the home in particular. Through the processed image of the home, she examines the norms of presentation and undermines them, and from what can be implied from the seriality, she raises the question of the possibility of presenting reality in a photograph.

In a photograph, like in a home, there is more hidden than revealed. Elbling presents herself as a photographer, and her work expresses the post-modernist thinking in contemporary art about the photographic medium and its power. Discussion about the photographic act and the deception inherent in it is not confined in her work to the gaze created by the camera or the computer; the impossible is not merely an image, but a "live" appearance. This is reflected in the works in which Elbling lets go of

the camera, as for example in Blue and Green (2011). In this work, Elbling traces the fundamental structure of the still life in landscape paintings or photographs. By flattening nature into two, horizontally arranged, colored glass panels–blue sky atop green grass–she deconstructs the picture of generic nature into its elements using industrial materials. The work shows how evidence of nature is possible also in an "unnatural" way, while making a claim about the workings of image and gaze: the material produces a picture in the eye of the viewer and from it–a thought, though the "evidence" does not necessarily exist in the field. The image produces the question of what really is representation of a landscape, or alternatively, what, effectively, is the image itself.

Elbling continues to broaden her inquiry into the making of the graven and the photographic image in the series Interactions and Proposals for Disorder, in which the photograph exists as a last resort of a much longer action. When she first moved to a studio outside her home, Elbling's creative conditions changed, enabling her to broaden her attempt to create complex handmade sculptural works. She creates architectonic spaces, three-dimensional models, which she builds by hand. The work takes many hours, and her desire to create them led her to learn the handicrafts that are usually reserved for laborers and skilled artisans, and to specialize in the various materials used in construction. In a perfectly timed symphony of light, tones and materials, Elbling creates images of perfect spaces. In miraculous coordination between image and frame, she creates a spectacular and deceptive artistic object. However, when one looks at the spaces she has built, the structures within them turn out to be unfeasible. A door might lead to a space, but stairs lead to a blank wall; one cannot traverse the opening in this curved wall, nor can one see anything from that window. These spaces are uninhabitable, as are the spaces in the series Untitled, 2008-2012. The structures she creates are not practical models that could ever serve as an ideal for an architect, contractor, or resident of a "Build Your Home" program hoping to realize their "perfect home" on the lot.

In combining the concrete and the photographic, Elbling expands the use of the medium: photography is the last in a series of actions and the evidence created in the final object does not attest to all "that has been" before–the hard work, the time devoted to it, the creation of the photographed objects. According to her, building the models responds to a need that wandering through neighborhoods and landscapes cannot satisfy: the creative work with the material, the tangibility and power involved in construction. Thus she places, on one hand the need for the image, the desire that led her to create the spaces, and on the other the recognition of the impossibility of the evidence in the final snapshot that will attest to the impossible place that existed before it.

In this way, Elbling uses the photographic medium–and the last drops of objectivity remaining in it–to examine questions about the very possibility of the creation of space. She considers the image in all its aspects and complexity: in the building of the image from its materials, in light, shadow, composition, texture and color, in its creation in print, in the color of the frame, the paper and the dissolving borders. Through all these, she fashions a space in which the perfect fit that is reflected creates erasure instead of emphasis: it is the echo of the unheard sound. The crafting of "perfect" objects only makes the ability to distinguish real space harder, and underscores even more emphatically how difficult it is for us to perceive how space is the fabrication of an image, the work of the contractor, artist, architect, statesman, even in an intimate space that is, ostensibly, a living space. Thus the immediate

information of the image revealed in the photograph, the informative one, has already declared itself impossible.

Herein clearly lies the difference between Elbling's purpose and Graham's. With Elbling, the photograph and the work of building go hand in hand–the essence of the image that appears in front of the viewer is as unstable as the essence of the work itself. It seems as if Elbling is saying that there is no place that is "home," and therefore, it is also impossible to create an image of it, or that even the image of the home is a declaration of its failure. In the active creation of the structures, she no longer needs the street, the neighborhood or the city to reveal their secrets to her. Like in her wandering works, Elbling informs the viewer that what is inherent in the photographic act is not a narrative writing of reality; but, at the same time, it is what the photograph gives back to the viewer, in the appearance of the work and its performative act. Her work makes the claim that not only reality creates impossible architectural structures–images do so as well. In Elbling's oeuvre, the physical house exists alongside potential houses that exist in the imagination of the viewer: the home appears as an image, never "mine," but as a suggestion, an idea, a longing. What is a home? Where is home? Who lives here? These questions are likely to remain forever unanswered.