



ANNA YAM *Untitled*, 2009, 55x80 cm, Black and white print



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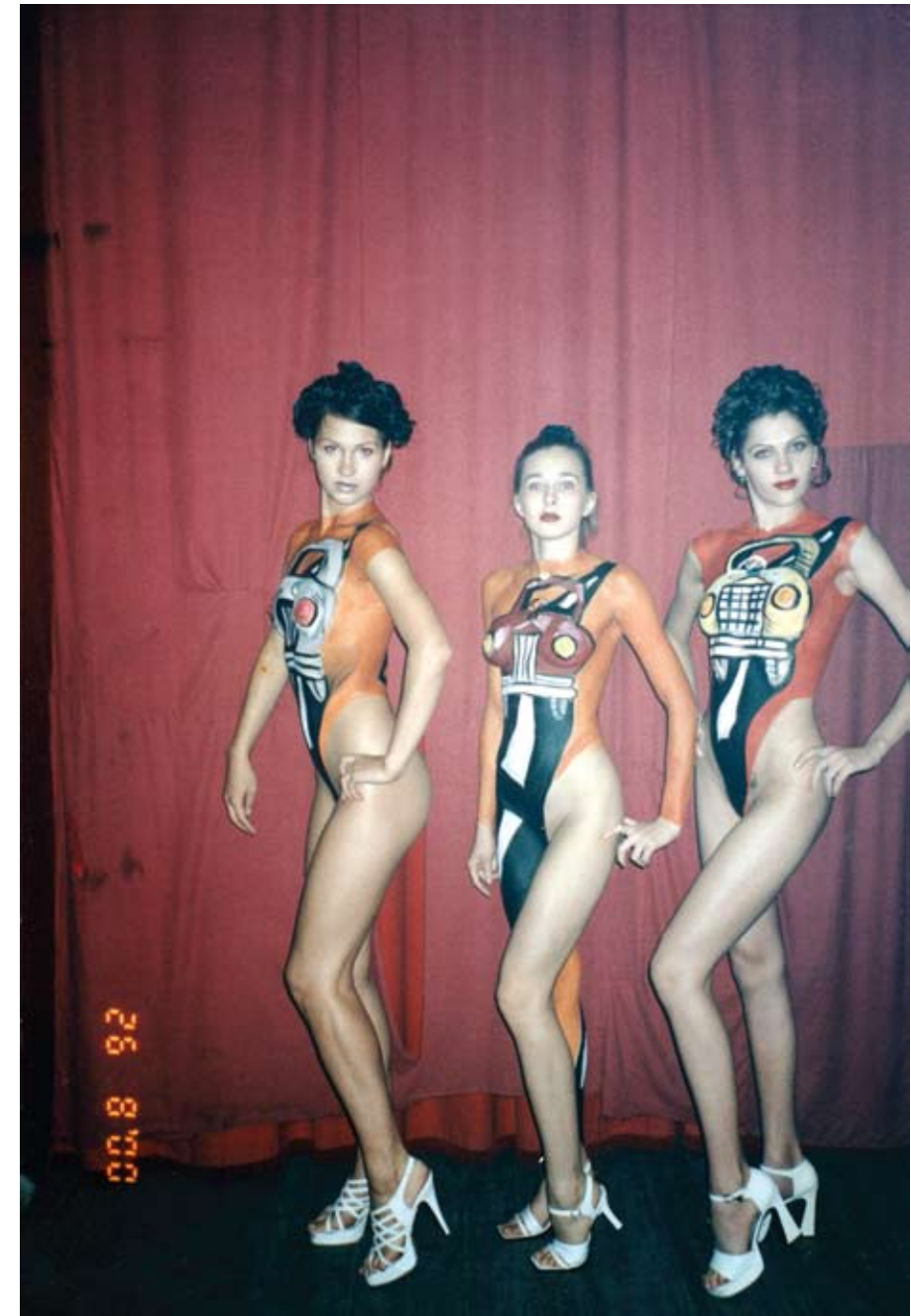
















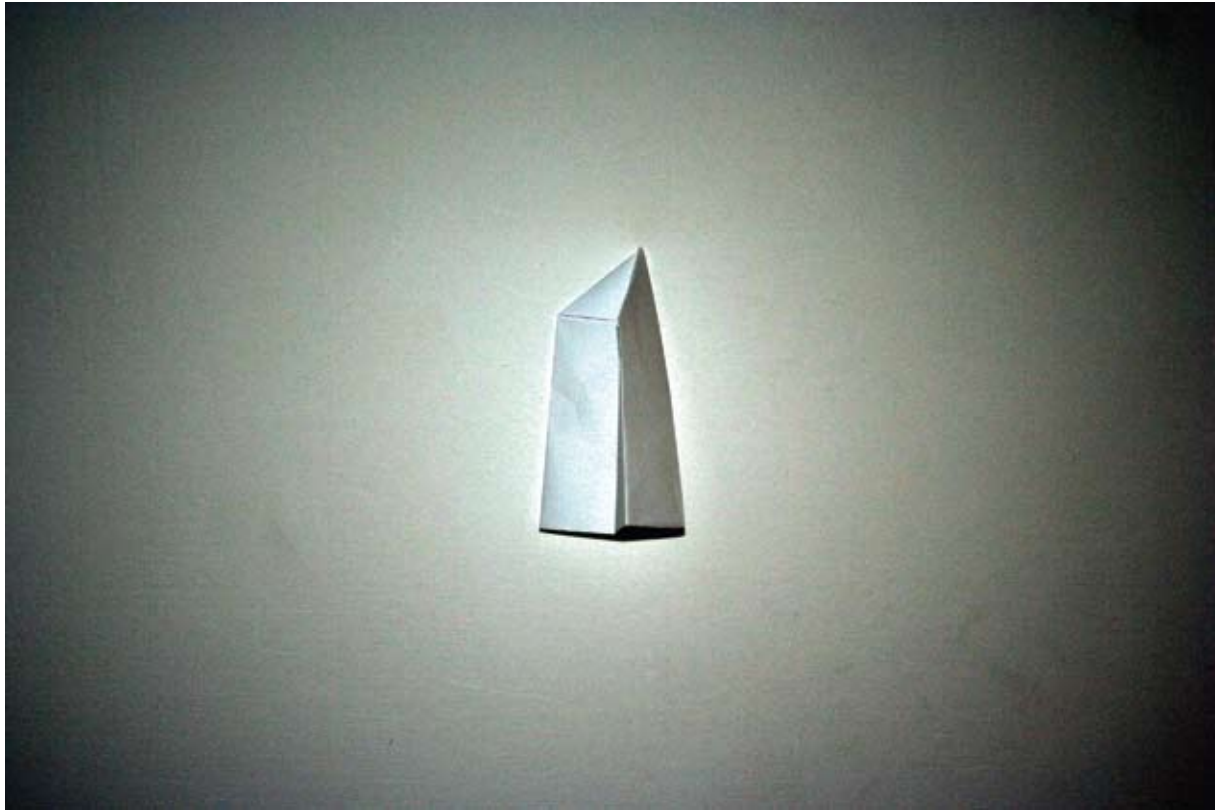
































ANNA YAM

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All measurements in centimeters, height x width

“Between me and my footsteps/an instinctive separation” *

Yair Garbuz

“Between me and my footsteps/an instinctive separation”, I tell myself with the help of Fernando Pessoa. This line is eminently suited to a discussion of the extraordinary photographs by Anna Yam.

The source and beginning of this essay lies in a feeling translated into motion, dictated by the photograph in front of me; an urge to turn away and to part from it; as if something is egging me on and pushing me forward. On the other hand, a pressing need beckons me back to the photograph, to the first viewing, the first elusive impression it made. That was the way I felt each time I backed away a bit from a photograph by Anna Yam. I felt myself standing there, squinting with uncertainty, afraid of stopping.

I try to translate this offside distancing into words and come up with one sentence that rushes into another, slightly more polished sentence. The new sentence sends out yet another shoot, similar, yet different from its predecessor. Each time I believe I have settled on a definition I think I understand, it's pushed aside by another, corrected, more updated version; once again changing the photograph and my memory of it.

The photographs immediately evoke a sense of separation. Though undoubtedly an oxymoron, I insist on defining it as a renewed separation. A separation that grows richer and more intense. So I, like other viewers, tend to stand away; to go away and to come back once again.

Someone sure of what they sees will naturally be sure of what they photographs, just as someone who believes in what they remembers, will believe in the truth and validity of documentation and photography as a reliable witness. Such a photographer will experience the click of the camera as a verdict in favor of frozen paralysis; an act of forging identity between what is seen and the photographed result. Someone so sure of these certainties will not even begin to question the elusive nature of what they have seen. They will merely join the ranks of those who slake the world's thirst for photographs that greedily document a lack of doubt. This common ambition to freeze reality is nothing but a death wish. Its results contrast starkly with the vital, hope-filled innocence given abundantly to those whose hand is light on the trigger. Freezing is the revenge of reality on those who trust in it. Freezing tries to

revitalize reality by using a technique of embalming – it's the end result of observation, with no ongoing hints at continuation.

Anna Yam has neither reserves of hope, nor a surplus of conclusions. Her photography is inconclusive. It is neither embalmed nor frozen. It creates a dynamic, living reality that follows its text, which is also incessant. Her photographs are content to live with the knowledge of the expected failures of documentation. Her greatest achievement is that her photographs have the qualities of a living creature, qualities of change; qualities of reaction.

Anna Yam takes each photograph with a slight, despairing delay – as if she and the photographed object have just managed to elude each other. This is no tourist photo in real-time, if such a time exists. Neither is it a nostalgic documentation of the past. Maybe it's an authentic photograph in tourist-time. Maybe it's a photograph preparing to photograph. It's inevitably a photograph that has just missed the point. When its beauty is discovered, its lack goes into hiding. When its lack is discovered, the facts blur; when its facts are discovered, they seem like an illusion.

This is photography that begins after forgetfulness has begun to wage its war on memory.

With this in mind, when Yam clicks the button on her camera, the click epitomizes the sound of delay; the sound of missing out, the sound of erasing. This erasure does not just blot out what is; it erases one meaning by replacing it with its successor. The difficulty to remember, hence the difficulty to document, gives birth to a dynamic, ever-changing sense of yearning; not in the sentimental sense, but with reference to movement, the lack of ability to sink an anchor. Each photograph by Yam is the result of aesthetic vagrancy. The picture taken by a wavering, delayed click will be different in time, visibility and meaning, from what the eye has seen. Hence a picture that could have been biographical will become post-biographical. The most cohesive family is no more than a puzzle.

The delayed picture will not be completely other. It will not buy merit by a wild, well developed imagination, creative and dynamic design; neither with the help of gut-wrenching expressivity. It will be just a smidgen different – the bit that hurts, the bit that is nearly imperceptible. At times it can almost appear to meet the usual standards. The nearly organic change is like the difference between absolute identity and mere resemblance.

The picture, if I may use the poetic license of personification, is slightly older than what the eye can grasp.... It is postponed, it comes after seeing. Our sorrow, which intensifies with the photographs, starts from the seemingly simple feeling that if Anna had taken the photograph just slightly earlier, the inanimate object would truly be as is; that which was

broken off, would remain whole; the unrealized could have healed; what was photographed on a journey would be loaded with the joys of traveling and the family would be graced by harmonious documentation. Foreignness would turn into intimacy and the intentions of the night would become clear as daylight.

Anna Yam, lacking the hope of stopping, succeeds in making us feel towards her photographs as she feels towards her photographed objects. In particular the asking – has she chosen the right, necessary object? She manages to convey her attempt to absorb, understand, accept, reconcile and interpret; always with a sense of delay. After all, the photograph will never be able to restore anything to the photographer. It can only remind her of its inability to do so. The fact that there is no return from the photograph to the object does not optimistically imply that there is, in fact, a way forward.

At times, I imagine that Anna Yam does not choose what to photograph. Rather, she chooses from what she has photographed. From what she chooses, she asks, in retrospect – what have I photographed? And perhaps, also – why?

Facing one of her photographs, I feel like a man who is walking along the street and suddenly understands that less than a minute ago, he saw something. That something is still there, within eye's reach. He merely needs to turn his head around to see it, but it will never again be what he saw.

If we adhere to concepts from the world of photography, we must imagine that each time Anna chooses a frame to print, the machine seems to print the next frame. Though it was filmed in succession and it may be hard to differentiate one frame from its predecessor, it is merely an echo of the first frame. A slight turn of the head immediately creates a new photograph. All her photographs are, like the nature of photography, a copy – the original destroys itself. When the copy becomes the original, it too will vacate its position.

In other words: observing Anna Yam's photographs is like looking in the side-mirrors of a car – what you see there has passed before you are able to identify it. Sometimes this is the seeing after the seeing. A side mirror is not an interesting angle; it's a perspective that allows for mistakes and blunders. When we see a car alongside us through the side mirror, it has usually disappeared and we only see its reflection. Anna knows how to create a photograph that looks like a delayed identification of the car. She has the uncanny ability not to take possession of reality; not even to take possession of her family. She merely acquires the echo of reality and the shadow of her family. She reveals a non-acquisitive attitude towards her photographed objects, thus allowing them to pass or to change.

There is something so beautiful about her photographs that they can almost turn forgetting into a pleasure; at the very least because this forgetting is so productive. Yam gives the viewer an active role. The viewer's eye becomes the spotlight. The viewer activates this spotlight, but does not control it. It is an instinctive, physical reaction that pulls in opposite directions. The viewer goes in one direction and the photographs the other way; like electric poles that seem to be going backwards when we look at them from the window of a train.

Anna's slide projector presentation, in which changing slides create random juxtapositions, gives proof of her astute awareness of the nature of her photographs and their results. This is also the impression I get from a single photograph by Anna – changing.

This would also explain the way she uses existing photographs from her family album. The photographs that lived frozen between the pages of the family album, as “non-art”, are imbued with information and loyal to the task of preservation. For years on end they were clear and reliable. Suddenly, they were caught in Anna's side mirror, lost their factual validity and began to threaten our glance.

The photographs were rejuvenated; a complete contrast to eternal life. They are no longer just pictures from another era; they have become pictures of time itself. They are no longer a séance from the past; they have been given a fuse and a ticking clock. What returned to life will no longer be merely documentation. What doesn't belong to the album's owner will certainly not belong to us either. What is foreign to her will certainly be foreign to spectators. In Anna's photographs, a place becomes the path to a place.

Even when Anna is filming an ordinary, frontal, precise portrait or a picture with family members, the relatives in it look like they've been captured by the picture, on their way to another picture. Even the most harmonious family picture seems to assume a polygamous nature and nomadic character. Sometimes the people become objects, just as inanimate nature seems at times personified.

Memory is the enemy of yearning; yearning is the enemy of the present. Truth competes with changing interpretations; what is alive and changing is suspicious of the inanimate and vice versa. Random and planned, central and marginal, large and small – all are interchangeable and dependent on context.

Anna Yam photographs and then goes on to check if she has managed, once again, to shoot the wrong frame, the next frame, the other frame. Each frame has another frame tagging along. From her unique position and stance, Anna lets herself photograph any

subject that comes along, with the certainty that the subject will not succumb. When she photographs a picture that is potentially satisfying, the result seems to say that satisfaction was just here, but has dissolved and left a trail of deception in its wake. The trail is beautiful on its own, but remains neither a trail, nor beautiful.

- * The title of this essay is taken from Fernando Pessoa's "What I Made out of Life" ("Que fiz eu da vida"), published in Hebrew by Carmel Publications. I would like to end with a poem from the same book, that caught my eye while looking for something else.

55 **

*The horror and the mystery of existence the existence of life; the existence of life besides me
the existence of houses and things around me –
the table on which I lean, the light of the sun
on the book that I don't read because it is a stranger –
these are the illusions of existence...an absurd entity,
a whole mystery of each and every thing.
Past existence and the people in it, their experience
other, and the imagined future –
it weighs on me in its mystery
stalking me in terror.
What sees all this in me, is this itself!*

Out of the corner of my eye, on the next page, I glimpsed another line from the end of another poem: "in light of our ignorance about the way all this can be". As the view from the corner of the eye is the core of this essay, I copied down the line... though it's not the line I saw.... and yet...

- ** (Translator's note: the translation of the poem makes no pretense at being an artistic rendition)

Anna Yam: Comfortable Anxiety

Maya Benton

Anna Yam wants you to feel a little bit anxious. Hers is a world of in-between places and gaps. Her native Russia and her adopted home in Israel are viewed through staged, aesthetic compositions, and indigenous snapshots and family photographs imported from far-away Yekaterinburg. She navigates chaos and stillness, the familiar and unfamiliar and, perhaps most crucially, belonging and being set apart. Her images are both inside and outside the experiences they capture. Yam uses wit and humor as a bulwark against the harsher realities of alienation and transplantation; soothing the viewer with extreme beauty while presenting images both alluring and at times disarmingly foreign and fetishistic.

Upon my first encounter with Yam's work in a small exhibition in Israel several years ago, I was immediately reminded of a line in Abigail Solomon-Godeau's seminal essay on photographer Francesca Woodman: "Prodigies in photography are singularly rare, women prodigies virtually unheard of". Yam was 26 years old at the time. The majority of her work produced still then was made while she was in her early 20's (and much of it was drawn from her student portfolio); it included images taken in Israel and on her return trips to Russia, as well as an ongoing series of re-photographic work and appropriations culled from her family photographs and deemed "readymades".

Francesca Woodman, whose life and ambitiously remarkable body of work were cut tragically short at the age of twenty-two, focused on women's bodies. Both subject and voyeur, Woodman subverted notions of the male gaze by placing her work in autobiographical and intimate, albeit crumbling, domestic settings. Yam, who immigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union, offers a platform for feelings of dislocation, anxiety and rupture that are inextricably linked to immigrant experiences, particularly those of the Russian Jews living in Israel today. But she does so in a way that is humorous, witty and even a bit sly.

While much of her work is placed in domestic settings, there is a palpable absence of what some might call a "female" sensibility. It is not a "woman's space", it is not even "real" space. Her work occupies a liminal zone between comfort and anxiety, native and tourist, nostalgia and distance and, perhaps most seminally in her working method, between artist

and appropriator. She uproots familiar notions of authorship and cultural belonging and asks that the viewer find a place of comfort, if not of ease, in a world full of quirky, oddly suspended and unexpected images: fur balls on wildly patterned sofas, spotted cow tongues lying on plush carpets, towels twisted to evoke charmed snakes against heavily printed wallpaper and the contortions of the human form against chaotic and remote domestic backdrops. All these seem to connote both otherworldly possibilities and the “medicalized” limitations of the body. Her work is both humorous and full of unexpected finds. It is a revelation.

Consider her accomplished photograph of a darkly spotted cow’s tongue, laid out in clear focus against a plush, heavily patterned and jewel-toned carpet like a turgid, medicalized sculpture, its background receding into darkness. It is quite lush, yet slightly disturbing. It is extreme in both its beauty and in the liminal place it occupies. In a more prosaic photograph of a domestic interior, an eerily unoccupied yet ramshackle living room sets the scene, while a large mound of brown fur sits upright on a brightly printed sofa, like a friend waiting for company. This is set against patterned walls and thickly piled carpets, bridging feelings of unease with a sense of humor. This sense of humor, so vital to her work and to the unique balance of comfort and anxiety she cultivates, functions like an invitation to appreciate the weirdness of life. She asks you to be comfortable with the disquieting sense that you don’t quite belong anywhere and yet her work – both in Russia and in Israel – operates in a kind of ambiguous zone, both familiar and foreign, inviting you in while reminding you that you don’t really have a place.

Yam is formally trained, yet she aspires to the “ordinary” as exemplified by her “readymade” family snapshots cleverly reused to snub authorship and defined artistic hierarchies. The use she makes of these is entirely new. By appropriating her family albums to cultivate a sense of unease, she manages to convey a warm invitation to join her on an intimate journey, yet you are never quite sure if you will really be allowed in. As a child, Yam was obsessed with her family albums, many of which were carefully embellished by her grandmother, a physician and amateur photographer. As an art student, she returned to these images and filed them away for future projects, hoping they would make their intentions known to her in due course.

When she begins a project, Yam does not have a rigid narrative in mind. Rather, she allows the images to communicate an evolving mood as she reviews her photographic travel-booty. She roams between formats, styles, cameras and black & white and color film; she utilizes amateur approaches alongside highly staged fine-art shots. From the hundreds of captured images she chooses only a select few that “make it” to print. Her editing process is strict and

precise – she envisions everything: from the size of the print and the color of the frame to the relationships between the images in the space.

Yam returns to the same two places year after year: Haifa, where she spent her childhood, and Yekaterinburg, where her father still lives today. Up until 1990, the latter was a Soviet city full of industrial army factories, so throughout Yam's childhood it was completely closed to tourists. She returns to the same spot twice a year, navigating memories of the past, both tourist and native guide. When she's in Russia she photographs like crazy, stopping to review and edit the copious images she's shot only upon returning to Israel. She is often amazed at what she sees; at what she didn't remember photographing during her trip. It is not surprising that her work so poignantly communicates sensations of rupture and dislocation and that she is always aware of photography's indubitable ties to memory.

Yam arrived in Israel at the age of twelve. Her primary goal was to become fully Israeli; to fully embrace her new home. Ironically, her success as one of Israel's most promising young artists is the result of her foreign point of view on both of her photographic locations – Russia and Israel. Yam's work gives one the feeling that something is slightly amiss (a feeling she actively cultivates). She is thrilled when something is not quite right, when "accidents" enter the frame and when the serendipity of such accidents conveys a world that is slightly off kilter. This leads to a subtle yet palpable shift in perspective on the part of the viewer. She asks you, with wit and humor, to get comfortable with the anxiety of all the in-between places she continues to discover and expose.

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