

TEMPO RUBATO

Assaf Shaham

The King is Dead, Long Live the King!

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Regarding The Emperor's New Clothes

Imagine two scanners facing one another as they perform the only function they are capable of performing: scanning. They embark on an intense seductive mating ritual. One head moves up, the other one down, they both go down and simultaneously go back up again; In movement, whether in or out of synchronization, they exchange fluids and perform a discursive sexual act.

Susan Sontag claimed that photography is “not such a successful form of intercourse”¹ because the camera maintains a distance between that which is penetrating and that which is being penetrated. Assaf Shaham’s scanners will never feel each other. There will forever be that distance between them, rendering actual contact impossible. The resulting works of this sterile intercourse are yet surprisingly fertile. Flat, mechanical and technological to the extreme, these color fields are exemplary sons of a formalistic dynasty: they are Mondrian's grandchildren, Rothko's nephews and Walead Beshty's adopted children. The yellowish light of the projecting bulb used in the darkroom is here replaced with the bright white light of the scanning device and random strips of lights, the sharp and accurate inkjet prints are favored over chemical photo paper and the ready-made was chosen over the artist’s darkroom.

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Shaham’s work is concerned with the very space between the king’s death and the beginning of his successor’s reign, precisely in the gap between the comma and it's following letter it happens after photography has been repeatedly murdered; after it died, was re-born, fell down, rotted from within, was salvaged and brought back up on its feet again.

What appears like a large-scale replica of an Ilford photo paper pack leans against a wall, basking in a realistic glory of sorts. It is a marvelous reproduction of the original with a three dimensional appearance that was only altered as the original motif was replaced by the artist: where a harmless consensual image once appeared, Shaham has implanted a photographic rape scene.²

In a small piece, dark silhouettes are burnt within a split of a second. It is a black footnote at the endpoint of a prolonged history of power and violence. American radiation in Hiroshima scorched out an eternal memory in real time. The gesture of the original photographer of this image – equally created by the bomb – is reactivated here by Shaham. That photographer is dead, long live the new photographer.

¹ Sontag Susan, *On Photography*, “In Plato’s Cave”, 1977

² Blow Up, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966

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Shaham, much like other photographers who belong to this generation, operates like a dysfunctional Narcissus. He gazes at his own reflection, momentarily falls in love, but then everything changes. During a prolonged gaze, he sees worn out images whose sequentiality demonstrate an aesthetic quest for beauty and simultaneously, a digression from it.

As he both rejects and accepts the photographic discourse, he acknowledges Edward Steichen's "The Family of Man", sees Powell's "Peeping Tom", reads Jeff Wall's "Signs of Indifference" and encompasses Moholy-Nagy's photograms. Here and there, he recognizes an attitude similar to that of Duchamp, after whom nothing has been the same. It is as though Shaham is right beneath the water surface, hearing him saying *Déjà-lu*.³

All these referential reflections are at once becoming Shaham's visual grammar. An irreconcilable gap is left open for interpretation, like the faint hum of music played from the other room or music that vibrates out of a pair of headphones, slightly removed from the ear. This is the range of the discourse. It is the vacuum between the moment the image has been produced and the moment of its consumption.

The King is Dead, Long Live the King! A quick examination reveals that there are numerous written versions of this phrase (originally in French). Sometimes, it is punctuated by a comma, sometimes by a hyphen or a period. Either way, there's no grief and no goodbyes, no adjustment or transitional phase. Shaham understands that a king must be crowned, and tailors an emergency suit for his heir, so as not for him to appear bare in public. But as he excavates and extracts the portraits of August Sander, reshaping the front cover of his iconic book as a wide open crater, he knows that at this very moment, the most appropriate outfit for the king is his nakedness.

Yair Barak, 2012

³ Duchamp phrases the term describing something that has already been learned or read, and is being reconsidered.