

“The historian’s task, luckily, is to try to understand the past. It is time for the historian to step aside to let the images speak” (Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi)¹

Eli Singalovski is the 2019 winner of the Lauren and Mitchell Presser Photography Award for a Young Israeli Artist, awarded for the fifth time at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Singalovski (b. 1984), a graduate of the Photography Department at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, presents works shot in Germany between 2017 and 2020. These photographs are the result of an ongoing photographic research focused on modern architecture in the German urban landscape in the decades post World War II, within the context of this era’s complex political reality.

Singalovski photographs architectural structures at night, using long exposure, in black and white, in focused compositions that capture entire buildings. He isolates the photographed structures from their environments, neutralizing “distractions” and interferences, in order to focus the viewer’s gaze onto the façade of the architectural object, with its plethora of details, against the opaque sky. This in turn emphasizes the buildings’ monumentality and plasticity and features them as sculptural presences in the expanse. The exhibition presents series of photographs selected from an extensive archive created by Singalovski. It represents an urban environment that could not have existed in reality, and offers a parallel review of architecture originating from East and West Germany.

While the exhibition and its photographed objects are charged with German history, the subject is universal and bears a relation to Israeli architecture. “The concrete trend (rather than the traditional masonry, which has always been perceived as an external code, a proscribed cover) contains the foundations of Israeli architectural fundamentalism, which will continue to intensify in direct proportion to the national emotion graph.”² Throughout the first decades of the state of Israel, many of its

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 70.

² Zvi Efrat, *The Israeli Project: Building and Architecture, 1948-1973*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2004, Vol. 1, pp. 100-109 [in Hebrew].

architects were influenced by Brutalism,³ characterized by building with raw concrete (*béton brut*). This in turn linked Brutalism with the Zionist movement, charging it with a political meaning, perceived by many as an “Israeli material.”

One method used by regimes to bolster their status is to appropriate public spaces and conscript architecture as a tool for ideological expression. A large-scale photograph printed on wallpaper features a full-sized typical East-German apartment block. The building is uniform and mostly symmetrical, in a standard residential architectural form. East Germany’s uniform, restrained architecture, whose main concern is functionality, conformed to the regime’s Socialist policy of equalizing economic and social strata. A series of photographs on a separate wall documents lateral views of such buildings (resulting in a narrow vertical image). Through repetition, Singalovski extricates from the buildings’ uniform visibility those elements that express the architect’s independent design, and presents in his photographs the rich visual language that exists in the margins, on the side of the buildings.

A wall at the center of the gallery features a series of small photographs of decorative concrete walls in a geometrical abstract design. The images, devoid of background, as if cut out of their original environment, were created using digital photogrammetry and software. Photogrammetry is a photography-based technique that enables, using designated software, to create programmed three-dimensional models and is used, among other things, for constructing maps from aerial photographs. This technique provides the artist with full control of the medium: composition, perspective, light, depth of field, etc. The computerized model created from the concrete walls, photographed from various angles, manifests the existing as well as the missing data derived from the photographed raw materials, similarly to a reconstructed archaeological find that is partly original and partly added elements. Quite simply: even the data undocumented by the camera during the collection of raw materials for the computerized model are given an expression in the final image.

The image that is disassociated from context in these specific works corresponds with the photographed objects. The stylized concrete walls are aesthetically different from the architecture typical of East Germany at that time. The geometrical abstract was identified with the cosmopolitanism of the Federal Republic

³ The term Brutalism was derived from *béton brut*, coined by Swiss architect Le Corbusier (1887-1965). Brutalism sought to express a building’s constructive “truth” and raw concrete was the perfect expression of this idea in building.

and signified the “evil” influences of Western culture, and therefore rejected. The exhibition refers to these unconventional designs through the works of Hubert Schiefelbein (b. 1930), Friedrich Kracht (1925–2007) and others who created such architectural objects. For example, the artist Karl-Heinz Adler (1927–2018) devoted his whole career to the geometrical abstract. His work, like that of others, was at the mercy of the regime, which rejected anything that did not conform to its adopted national style of Socialist Realism. In addition to his studio work, which was not exhibited until later in his career, Adler created decorative concrete walls and modular architectural decorations for the façades of public and residential buildings, which corresponded directly with his abstract works. The presence of these decorated concrete walls in the public sphere accentuates the fact that, despite restrictions, artists and designers could (beyond a certain radar) exhibit works that correspond with their contemporary Western art arena.⁴

In 1957, an innovative architecture exhibition was held in West Berlin, titled “Interbau.”⁵ In sober hindsight it exemplifies the use of architecture for expressing political battles during the Cold War. The exhibition sought to present West Germany to the world as a democracy standing side by side with France, the UK, Italy and the USA in terms of politics and culture. In the context of the exhibition, and as part of the rehabilitation and rebuilding of the Hansaviertel district, leading international architects were invited to suggest innovative architectural plans and designs. At the center of the exhibition was the rebuilding of Berlin, but its influence was greatly evident throughout West Germany’s rebuilding projects. The motivation of this ambitious project was to differentiate the West from the order and uniformity of planning typical of the East and, through the difference, originality and formal variation, to take a new stance representing freedom of choice as a symbol of democracy. The disparities in design and planning of rebuilding the cities destroyed during the war are a reflection of the opposing ideological perceptions of the two sides.

Germany, divided between East and West after World War II, is a case study for the complexity of history and the way in which it is fixed in public consciousness. For example, the German Democratic Republic that ruled East Germany between 1949

⁴ Linnea West, "Lines of Official and Unofficial Art in the GDR: Karl-Heinz Adler and Geometric Abstraction," *Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context*, MoMa website, 23 January 2019.

⁵ Kamran Farshchi, *Revisiting Interbau Exhibition 1957 in Berlin, from the City of Stone to the City of Tomorrow* (M.Arch Thesis), Ankara: Middle East Technical University, June 2019.

and 1990, with disastrous ramifications for its society and economics during the second half of the previous century, also attained achievements that were beneficial for its citizens but have been overlooked in the familiar historical narrative.⁶ Community spirit and solidarity, job security, affordable housing, social conditions, free health care and equal rights for women are only some of the commitments the state showed its citizens. In contrast, the German Federal Republic in the West, noted for its high quality of living, multi-culturality, freedom of speech and free economy, suffered from extreme class divide and discrimination against women far more than the East, and did not undergo complete denazification.

In addition to delving into German history and traditions of modern architecture, a clear and concrete photography language emerges in the exhibition. The works on display were shot using a digital camera, and Singalovski has set himself a rule never to interfere and edit the image any further than possible with traditional analog photography. That is, nothing is added to or removed from the original photograph, and it remains a direct and trustworthy photograph (as far as this can be said of a photograph). The only changes during editing are corrections of perspective in Photoshop, which can also be made in large format in analog photography, and the shift from color to black-and-white photography (in digital cameras color is the default option). The aesthetics of Singalovski's work consciously corresponds with commissioned architectural photography: the set photography angles capture the whole building, the composition is centered in relation to the format, the range of greys and mostly, the artist's commitment to his photographed objects and his language of representation. Thanks to these characteristics, the photography becomes relevant to discourse and research of architecture, too. This aspect of his work is significant and is linked with Singalovski's motivation and his wish to further validate contemporary photography.

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⁶ Bruni de la Motte and John Green, *Stasi State or Socialist Paradise? The German Democratic Republic and What Became of It*, London: Artery Publications, 2015.