

Keren Amiran, Ehad Ha'am, 23.2.99 - 30.3.99
Exhibition site: <http://www.hagar-gallery.com/keren0.html>

Text by Shelly Cohen

Urban Family Rasemblance

The series of photographs created by Keren Amiran, who photographed "Ahad Ha'am" street in various cities in Israel, is read as a visual riddle, an identification game. The rule is: "Match the photograph to the address". The interesting moment is the moment preceding the labeling, a moment in which the viewer goes through a stream of associations, stereotypes, possibilities and his concepts regarding the Israeli environment. These moments confront the photographed reality. The question is, therefore, a question of identity. But the answer, which is delayed through the way in which the photographs and the captions beneath them are hung, is not enough, since it does not teach us to classify. Will we be able to identify Tiberias when we once more encounter a photograph of one of its streets? The reality is grayer, less distinguishable than the stereotypes; the intermediate tones take control. Amiran dissolves the illusion of the center's foreknowledge of the space surrounding it.

Within the conceptual framework of the work of art, three sets of signs are paralleled: language, photography and architecture. The series of photographs examines the term "street" as a symbol in language, and as a form of conventional architectural organization of the public space. The work of art also exists beyond the conceptual generalization. Amiran is interested in details: the signposts, the cars, elements in the street, and even human figures all function as human signals. They are photographed from afar and have reciprocal relations with each other.

Amiran's starting point – "Ahad Ha'am" Street in Tel-Aviv – does not appear in the exhibition, but it is absorbed in its assumptions, and thus it is important to mention this street, which runs between two of Tel-Aviv's symbols. It begins at the foot of the Shalom Tower, Tel-Aviv's first modern tower, which was a symbol of progress and urbanity at the time (while today it is a reminder of insensitivity to values of environment conservation). It ends at the Culture Hall site, which has become the symbol of Israeli Western secular culture.

The distinction between Tel-Aviv, which is not photographed, but is present as a cultural coefficient, and the other towns and cities, 28 in number, in which the Ahad Ha'am Street appears, creates a division between the center and the periphery. Amiran turns her look towards the fringes; she enables the peripheries to be seen, peripheries which in the past were excluded from the artistic discussion. In doing so she joins a group of artists who address the subject of construction, suburbs and fringes. Does she become "Ahad Ha'am": one of the people? Does she fall into the common trapping in an attempt to represent the other, thus maintaining the power relations between center and fringes?

The literal definition of the work of art is a playful one. The common feature of the group of streets – their name – is random - the relation between the name and the object is arbitrary. We don't really wish to argue that the streets in this group have something in common, which distinguishes between them and other streets in Israel and justifies their common name. But surprisingly, despite the arbitrary nature of the definition, all the photographed streets do have something in common.

Asher Zvi Gintzberg, in his article "This is Not the Way", written in 1889, adopted for himself the name "Ahad Ha'am" ("One of the People"), to emphasize that his attitude is not that of a writer but of one of the people. The streets called after him are small streets with no more than two tracks, usually one-way-streets - "simple" streets. No sharp differences between north and south, between small and large towns, between poor and rich towns, are reflected in these streets. The photographs appear to be of one group, one family, sometimes even one street. The definition of the group dictates, in a pseudo-scientific way, the distribution of

the examined variables across the country: each street is in a different town or city. Although the distribution does not ensure a representative sample, it does indicate that what appears in the photographs perhaps reflects a larger part of the Israeli environment.

What is the source of the similarity between the photographs?

Every presentation of a series prompts comparisons. Every comparison holds within it arguments about uniformity and difference. The choice of photographs emphasizes the aspects they all have in common. Amiran's look produces a type of similarity. Out of a variety of possibilities, the frame that is usually presented is taken from the center of the street section, from the road, from the level of the eye, so that the road disappears into the center of the frame. This is a viewpoint that is not that of a pedestrian.

In the photographs from Petah-Tikva, Be'er-Sheva and Kiryat-Bialik, the photograph angle is different. The glance is turned to one side of the street. If Amiran had photographed "Ahad Ha'am" Street in Haifa as it is seen from under the wheels of a car, and in Be'er-Sheva – as it is perceived from the top of a high building, the similarity would have evaporated. The reality is photographed from a wide angle and represented "as it is", i.e. without any dramatic cuts or unusual photographic angles. The serial repetitiveness, lacking any narrative, reflects and intensifies the repetitiveness of the street as a form that regularizes, produces and reproduces the environment. Amiran's photograph organizes the reality, and thus it emphasizes its unity.

What is the element that is perceived as the same, or as similar, in the subjects of the photographs, in the different streets? Is it the urban architecture? Is it the general variables of the environment: for example the brightness of the light? Or perhaps it is the smaller units, the recurring details, in the elements of the street: paving, lampposts, trash cans, vegetation? Perhaps the answer is in the way the various components are joined together?

Between each two photographs in the series there is something similar, even if that thing is not common to all the other photographs. In the photographs taken in Rishon-Letzion, Herzelia, Beit-She'an, Ra'anana and Netania – diagonal electricity wires cut the frame. In Kiryat-Bialik, Ashdod, Hadera, Bat-Yam and Kholon, there is a typical apartment building that looks like a box on columns. Its facade, turned towards the street, is flat, simple and functional. The streets in Afula, Ramat-Gan, Ashdod and other towns are similar in the lack of symmetry between the two sides of the street. The vegetation, elements of lighting, and the height of the buildings are not divided equally, and the sense of order and harmony is offended.

Here I must employ the Wittgenstein's concept of "family resemblance" as it appears in the book "Philosophical Investigations"¹: "When relations of familial likeness appear, all the phenomena refer to each other in many different ways. There are relations of similarity and closeness between them... We see a complicated network of figures that are congruent with each other and which bisect each other." Through the concept of "family resemblance", Wittgenstein criticizes the relation between the concept and the object. He argues against the prejudice according to which things that have a common general name should also have other things in common. According to Wittgenstein, not only streets that have a common name but all streets cannot have anything in common, since there is no list of essential and sufficient conditions for the definition of the concept of "street". The definition is replaced by the concept of "family resemblance".

The "Even Shoshan" dictionary defines street as "a paved way between rows of houses, for walking and as a passage for people and vehicles." But is a narrow lane between houses, an alley, such as "Ahad Ha'am" Street in Kiryat-Yam, a street? When the continuity of the street is cut off, as we see in "Ahad Ha'am" Street in Afula, does the term "street" still apply?

The "Ahad Ha'am" project indicates a typical urban visual family that apparently goes beyond the examined group, and characterizes the constructed space in Israel. Thus, it awakens

questions regarding the visual dimension and the aesthetics of the Israeli culture. If architecture is responsible for the similarity between the urban phenomena as they appear in Amiran's photographs, this is the place to argue against this architecture. In Israel, a limited number of common architectural types are populated by a wide variety of forms of life. Architecture serves as a uniform container that is indifferent to changes in the context (location, the extent of urbanity, the population's social-economic variables). If identical forms of architecture: row houses and high-rise apartment buildings populate prestigious neighborhoods, such as "Neve Avivim" in Tel-Aviv, and poor neighborhoods, if the same architectural types are built in Ramat Aviv and in Ashdod, then the social differences are not reflected in architectural differences. Thus, is architecture egalitarian, popular, reproducing its most sophisticated products for the masses as for the rich? Or is its' language meager, its effect on its inhabitants small and its power to shape the environment, to create a difference, limited?

The explanation for the development of certain forms of architectural types is complex. For instance: the "apartment building" type was created as the result of a certain historical chain of events, for political and economical reasons, and in order to satisfy the demands of the market. Centralist governmental planning formed uniform solutions in order to inhabit the large waves of immigration in the fifties and the sixties. Later on, the contractual building in the private market reproduced an identical type in different standards that enable a change of price according to location. Various characteristics (such as the closed balconies) are a result of legislation, and legislation is affected by the demands of the public and by cultural conventions (for instance, the extent to which the balconies are used).

A closer look at the photographs reveals that the perceived similarity is in fact divided into several forms along the continuum oscillating between the urban and the suburban. These forms are distinguished in the height of the buildings, in their density and in their uses: in Kiryat-Ata, Azur, Acre and Ashkelon, the suburbs are not dense. In photographs from these towns, the road bends in a picturesque way that is remindful of the convention of landscape drawing. The private houses, with slated roofs, are spread on relatively large areas constituting a part of the green texture, in which the building is not dense and not very regular. In Ra'anana and Kfar-Saba, "Ahad Ha'am" Street goes through old residence areas, in which the density of the private homes reinforces the continuity of the street, and creates a more urban suburb texture. In a new neighborhood in Ashkelon, the density emphasizes the repetitive module of the building. In Be'er-Sheva, Haifa, Kholon, Ramle and Bat-Yam, there is a higher degree of urbanity, but it is still a sparse urbanity. In all the towns and cities, the "Ahad Ha'am" streets are never central streets. Apartment buildings with four or five floors stand beside low suburban houses, often with slated roofs. They usually combine commercial with residential uses. (Rehovot, Hadera).

Is there a fundamental difference between the appearance of the suburbs and the appearance of the center? As aforesaid, the center, "Ahad Ha'am" Street in Tel-Aviv, is not presented in the exhibition. It is subject to the viewer's memory. The viewer's biography dictates the interpretation of the work of art. In my eyes, as an architect and a resident of Tel-Aviv, the various "Ahad Ha'am" streets are perceived as familiar, they do not create a sense of foreignness, they do not hold any expression of the "Other". They belong to one visual family, and they are a part of the majority (unlike the spatial metaphor of thin margins and wide center).

However, "Ahad Ha'am" Street in Tel-Aviv is richer, more colorful and intensive, more urbane than the other photographed streets. It is characterized by different building styles: eclectic, international (Bauhaus) and contemporary. And it populates several functions: residence combined with commerce, lawyers' offices and financial companies of the City of Tel-Aviv. One section of it is only office buildings.

"Ahad Ha'am" was presented at the Heinrich Böll Gallery in Nachlat-Binyamin Street in Tel-Aviv, not far from Ahad-Ha'am Street. The exhibition strives to turn the glance of the Israeli

art world, reflexive as a rule, outwards, to the physical building in which it is contained. The Ahad Ha'am project indicates that even if the center and the fringes are different from each other in their cultural activity, they operate within one physical reality.

"Ahad Ha'am" streets in Israel do not pass through very rich neighborhoods, nor do they pass through Arab villages. The definition of the work of art focuses the project on the average, the banal, the everyday of the visual space. And the banal is presented in everyday means, in "Zerex" photographs that refrain from the richness of the prints of artistic photography.

¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Translation: A. Ulman-Margalit, Magnes Publishing, 1997, pp. 65-67.

First Published at: "Studio", Art Magazine, No' 103, June 1999.

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1994-1995 Studied painting at Avni Art Institute, Tel-Aviv. 1995-1998 Studied at the Kalisher School of Art, Tel-Aviv. 1998 Studied at the Art Teacher's Training College, Beit-Berl. 1999 Studied in the Young Artists' Program, Bezalel Academy of Arts & Design, Jerusalem. Currently studying in the MA Fine Arts Program, Middlesex University, London.

2000 Video project for the Belgian Television, Brussels

1999 Quicksilver Gallery, Middlesex University, London

1999 Center For Contemporary Culture, Barcelona

1999 Archive of the South, Tel-Aviv [Curators: Rony Fleischer and Vered Maimon]

1999 "Ahad Ha'am", Heinrich Böll Foundation, Tel-Aviv*

From: Ben Zvi, Tal (ed.), 2000. *New Middle East: Eleven Exhibitions, 1998-1999, at Heinrich Böll Foundation, Tel Aviv*, Jaffa: Hagar Association, pp 96-94