

## **“The World Exists. It Would Be Meaningless to Repeat It.”**

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Gaston Zvi Ickowicz’s photographs are beautiful and powerful, and are imbued with a presence that arrests the viewer. This “presence,” as I see it, is their defining trait. It is the presence of what is in its place – the village Jatt on the face of the earth; the boy on the large rock; the archeological ruins at the excavation site.

In the early fifth century B.C., the Greek philosopher Parmenides wrote: “For being is, but nothing is not.”<sup>1</sup> Ickowicz’s photographs capture the being that is. “Nothing,” from his point of view, is “not.” Yet the being that “is” is not an inert object, but is rather revealed here to be a form of action, an event. It seems as if all there is – the crevice in the ground, the agglomeration of stones, the archeological ruins, the olive tree, the panoramic landscape, the boy suspended on the wall – is observed in these photographs as conducting a certain “way of life.” The viewer can do nothing but let what “is” present itself, since “being is” and must not be disturbed by what is not. What is – and I will return to this point later on – is disturbing enough in its own right.

In a short introductory essay to the catalogue of the exhibition *Moods and Modes in Israeli Photography* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2007), curator Nili Goren remarked that towards the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Israel – in

the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War and the disengagement, in the shadow of the Poverty Report, and on the more affluent side of the separation fence – any photograph that was not created in the service of the media or of a protest or civil-rights movement was at risk of appearing as a manifestation of indifference and escapism.<sup>2</sup>

It would be tempting to argue that Gaston Zvi Ickowicz’s photographs do indeed appear somewhat indifferent and escapist. In a tension-filled country, he seems to insist on turning his back on current events, conflicts, distress, and injustice. One of the ways he does this is by directing his lens downwards, where he finds stones, pits, archeological ruins. His photographs contain very few, if any, human figures. Nor is Ickowicz interested in dates – “1947/8,” “1882,” “586 B.C.” – and he does not usually date his own works. In what appears to be his most “human” and “political” photograph, *Road 443 (Checkpoint)*, a young man is seen perched on a large rock, holding something in his hand as he waits. If it weren’t for the photograph’s title, we would have no way of knowing that this is a Palestinian man awaiting his turn for an Israeli security check. One could even go as far as arguing that Ickowicz’s photographs are not simply “indifferent” or “escapist,” but that they also have a somewhat fetishistic dimension: at first glance, they appear

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John Mansley Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy: The Chief Fragments and Ancient Testimony, With Connecting Commentary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p.111.

<sup>2</sup> Nili Goren, “From Marks of Indifference to the Glory of Testimony, or: From ‘It Was There’ to ‘Here I am,’” in *Moods and Modes in Israeli Photography: Works from the Collection Gift of Leon and Michaela Constantiner* (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2007), p. 113.

to sanctify and glorify the earth, the stones, nature, and the landscape.

In an attempt to examine Gaston Zvi Ickowicz's work in the context of this specific place and time – a solo exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in the year 2011 – I would like to turn to a brief discussion of the history of local photography. The 1990s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were marked by the centennial anniversary of local photographic practices, whose inception the photographer and curator Guy Raz located in the 1890s.<sup>3</sup> These centennial celebrations were accompanied by the production of quite a few exhibitions and albums. In the catalogue of the exhibition *Time Frame: A Century of Photography in the Land of Israel* (The Israel Museum, 2000), curator Nissan Perez chose to sum up this historical period in the following statement: “Photography in Eretz Israel is the story of a displaced people trying to adapt to a new environment in a geographical and cultural space they have been hurled into, either by choice or by necessity, and their attempt to recreate an identity and develop a sense of belonging. For these photographers the process of capturing images becomes an act of appropriation through photography.”<sup>4</sup>

The decisive majority of the country's pioneering photographers were foreigners. Some had come to visit the Holy Land as tourists, while others were Jews who came to settle in the country.<sup>5</sup> On a certain level, Gaston Zvi Ickowicz may be compared to these early immigrant photographers: He was born in Buenos Aires in 1974, and immigrated to Israel in 1980. What, then, is the nature of the

connection between this native of Latin America and Israel's landscapes or archeological ruins? What is his connection to the village of Jatt? Is this not yet another case of an “uprooted individual” attempting, by means of photography, to create a “new identity” and develop a “sense of belonging?” Is his process of “capturing” images not, in fact, a form of “appropriation through photography?”

A significant number of historians and scholars of photography have pointed to the dramatic change that took place in the history of local photography during the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “As Israeli society matures,” Perez writes, “religious and national myths are being reconsidered and placed in a modern perspective involving the breaking of many traditional taboos. This itself implies a break with the past which is often painful and leads to a crisis of identity.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, whereas during the first decades of the Zionist settlement project photography gave expression to a collective, national, Zionist gaze, which may even be defined as a form of propaganda, in recent decades it has become personal, self-reflexively aesthetic, and critical.

My focus, in this context, is on landscape photographs and photographers, a definition that undoubtedly fits Ickowicz. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue *Framed Landscape: A Comment on Landscape Photography* (University of Haifa Art Gallery, 2004–2005), the artist and curator Avishay Ayal wrote that a historical survey of such images captures the transformation of the local landscape from one of barren expanses, poor mountain villages and crumbling cities to an industrialized,

<sup>3</sup> *Photographers of Palestine / Eretz Israel / Israel (1855-2000)*, (Tel Aviv: Mapa Publishing and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003), p. 271, in Hebrew.

<sup>4</sup> Nissan N. Perez, “Towards a History of Photography in the Land of Israel,” in *Time Frame: A Century of Photography in the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Guy Raz, *Photographers of Palestine / Eretz Israel / Israel (1855-2000)*, p. 9, pp. 255-263.

<sup>6</sup> Perez, “Towards a History of Photography in the Land of Israel,” p. 12.

crowded landscape suffused with political, national, and security-related conflicts. This process, according to Ayal, was paralleled by the evolution of photography's aesthetic language: Small-scale photographs that cast a romantic gaze at the biblical Holy Land have given way to monumental, carefully executed images that combine a critical gaze at society with an ironic perception of reality – based on a recognition of the limits of the photographic medium.<sup>7</sup>

Local photography, and specifically local landscape photography, is thus either “nostalgic,” “Romantic,” and “Zionist” – or, alternately, “critical,” “disillusioned,” and “personal.” The first trend characterized the early decades of the Zionist settlement project, while the second trend has characterized the past decades, most notably since the 1970s onwards. It is worth noting that this overarching narrative may be identified not only in the country's photographic history, but also in the political, social, and economic histories of local Jewish society, as well as in the history of its changing attitudes and world view.

Gaston Zvi Ickowicz's photographs may, of course, be read in relation to either of these historical contexts. In my opinion, however, such readings overlook a third possibility, which offers an alternative to both the “nostalgic-romantic” option and the “critical and disillusioned” one.

“The bottom line,” as Ickowicz declared in a 2010 newspaper interview with Eli Armon Azoulay, “is that I am a landscape photographer. I am concerned with landscapes and sites, and ask what a place is and what the differences are between things. These

are often very abstract places, and I really don't know what to look for when I'm there, but I have a strong urge to face the landscape.”<sup>8</sup> I do not think I would be mistaken in claiming that the categorical artistic command that motivates Ickowicz is the biblical “Get out of your country...to a land that I will show you.” Ickowicz did indeed leave his native country, Argentina, for the Promised Land, where he continues to wander about. “In some cases, a series begins with me going to see a certain area without the camera, or with just a digital camera. Only when I go back to the studio and look at the images, I know whether I should go back there again.”<sup>9</sup>

Ickowicz is, indeed, a wanderer. He is not bewildered by the land, nor does he impose himself upon it. As a photographer working in the Israeli sphere, he does not “occupy” a place in it, but rather “inhabits” it. In contrast to many other landscape photographers, who attempt to make a particular statement by means of their photographs – “See how beautiful the country is,” “See how we've harmed it,” “See the injustices to which we have given rise” – Ickowicz's photographs seem to ask us to let them present themselves without making any clear-cut, decisive “statement.” They contain the essence of all that is, and are surrounded by nothing that is not.

Ickowicz's decision to make Jerusalem the focus of the current exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum came to me as a surprise. In the course of our preliminary conversations, Jerusalem was never once mentioned. Ickowicz had different intentions, and was concerned with other subjects. One day,

<sup>7</sup> Avishay Ayal, “Foreword,” in *Framed Landscape: A Comment on Landscape Photography* (University of Haifa, Faculty of the Humanities, Art Gallery, 2004–2005), p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Eli Armon Azoulay, “A Visit to Gaston Zvi Ickowicz's Studio,” in [http://www.mouse.co.il/CM.articles\\_item,1050,209,55612,.aspx](http://www.mouse.co.il/CM.articles_item,1050,209,55612,.aspx), in Hebrew.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

while I was already engaged in writing this essay, he called me and announced: “I’ve decided to make some changes.” Only after developing and printing all the photographs he had taken, he confessed to me, did it become clear to him that Jerusalem was the central subject of this exhibition. Jerusalem surged up suddenly, and alighted at the center of Tel Aviv – offering another expression of the process I referred to above: Ickowicz allows his photographs to present themselves unexpectedly even in the course of the creative process itself.

And what is the nature of Ickowicz’s Jerusalem? Christian tourists at the Garden Tomb; the Muslim side of the Old City walls, as seen from the Gate of Mercy; the entrance to the archeological gardens and to the Western Wall; a panoramic view of Temple Mount; the Arab villages outside the walls; Silwan; a child, apparently a Palestinian, clinging onto the wall of the Old City at Nablus Gate. This is what is.

It is interesting to confront these recent photographs with Ickowicz’s earlier photographs from 2003–2006<sup>10</sup>, which are collectively titled “Settlement.” In this series, which was featured in the 2007 exhibition “The Pale” at Tavi Dresdner Gallery, Ickowicz focused mainly on photographing settlements and the separation wall.<sup>10</sup> In his essay about these works, the literary scholar Ariel Hirschfeld wrote that Ickowicz’s photographs radiated a powerful sense of “non-belonging.” The settlers’ houses, for instance, appeared to Hirschfeld “to have been set down upon the terrain without any foundations to connect them to the earth. The large settlement extending grandly over

an entire mountain saddle, which is reminiscent of a standard Israeli housing development, is no standard development. Unlike similar developments throughout the country, it bespeaks no visible, practical relation to its surroundings. Its location is entirely random and arbitrary. It has no center, and is endowed with no sense of place. The rows of houses seem to have been set down on the mountain range by a blind giant.”<sup>11</sup>

Ickowicz thus clearly knows how to take political photographs. He knows how to focus his camera not only at geological, archeological, and historical time, but also at the conflict-ridden present.

I spent quite some time talking to Ickowicz about the distance between his critical gaze at the separation wall and his phenomenological gaze at the walls of the Old City, and especially about the political implications of this difference. Yet he insisted on identifying a continuum between his earlier and most recent works, and argued that one certainly must not jump to any immediate political conclusions, since his work does not center upon the “political.” As he made clear in his interview with Eli Armon Azoulay about the “Settlement” series, which was photographed in 2005, “I distinguish between things that are overtly political and things that are more implicitly political, and I see the limits of each category. I know there are instances in which I push towards abstraction, and I also identify the concrete place I am photographing. But I am always interested in the story of the place.”<sup>12</sup>

More than anything, Ickowicz is interested in each place he approaches in and of itself. A place that existed prior to, and in a time more primeval

<sup>10</sup> Gaston Zvi Ickowicz, *The Pale* (Ra’anana, Israel: Even Hoshen Publishers, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Ariel Hirschfeld, “Structured Destruction: On Gaston Zvi Ickowicz’s Photographs of the Wall and the Settlements,” in Gaston Zvi Ickowicz, *The Pale*, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Eli Armon Azoulay, “A Visit to Gaston Zvi Ickowicz’s Studio.”

than, any “opinion,” “standpoint,” “statement,” “perspective,” or “meaning.” There may well be something to Hirschfeld’s political reading of his works. Yet as I see it, such a reading overlooks Ickowicz’s ability and talent to reveal that a place cannot, by definition, be “false,” “artificial,” or “decontextualized” – that a place cannot “lack a sense of place.” And this revelation is equally valid for geological sites such as countries, archeological sites such as antiquity sites, historical sites such as Jerusalem, or sites associated with current events, such as the settlements.

The photographs of the settlements and of the separation wall underscore the fact that Ickowicz is by no means an indifferent, escapist, a-political photographer. Yet his political stance is not given expression, as Hirschfeld argues, by exposing conflicts and forms of injustice in an immediate and decisive way. Ickowicz documents what is, what must not be disturbed by what is not – that is, by what is wrong and by what should be (“the occupation is corrupting, and thus must be stopped”; “the caravan is not really connected to the earth on which it stands, and thus must be dismantled”; “the separation wall obscures the horizon, and thus must be toppled”).

The political dimension of Ickowicz’s photographs is embedded in what is, and in its tangible way of life. Above all else, it is embedded in the tension between sky and earth. Many of his photographs are horizontally divided between what appears “above” and what appears “below.” The earth is heavy, and its weight pulls downwards. The sky – whose presence, in the case of Jerusalem, is

akin to the presence of divinity – pulls upwards. The earth often swallows and is swallowed into itself – see, for instance, the photographs of stones sunk into the earth, and of cracks, crevices, and caves. The sky is light, and lightens the burden. The sky does not tolerate the earth, and the earth does not tolerate the sky. Yet they cannot exist one without another – the sky is always the sky *above* the earth, the earth is always the earth *below* the sky. And being is all that exists in the tension between these two realms.

Brewing beneath the surface of Ickowicz’s photographs and beneath the present they capture is what I would call “historical time,” which goes back hundreds and thousands of years; “archeological time,” which goes back tens and hundreds of thousands of years; and, on the deepest layer, “geological time.” The time of current events is the time of the here-and-now – the time in which the caravan and the wall, among other things, may be captured. Historical time is the epic chronicle of man. Archeological time is that of vestiges, ruins, and tombs. Geological time belongs to the stones, the caves, and the earth. Yet these four temporal dimensions are not necessarily arrayed in a chronological manner, or in a succession of layers from the earliest to the latest. In many of the photographs, archeological or even geological time appears more recent than historical or contemporary time, which often appears as a passing whim. Ickowicz’s ability to condense these different temporal registers into a single photograph infuses the images with a sense of tension, even of threat. Their density makes them appear as if at any given

moment, one of them may intrude into another temporal register.

I gaze at the photograph of the stuffed bird and wonder what time it belongs to. What about the child suspended in midair on the stone wall in the photograph of Nablus Gate – how long has he been there? The two children in the vicinity of the Western Wall, outside the walls of the Old City – what are they looking for? The settlement extending across an entire mountain saddle as if set down there by a “blind giant” – is it situated securely under the sky, or is the earth about to swallow it? And, accordingly, does it belong to the present time or to archeological time? And who is that “blind giant”?

What “is” in Ickowicz’s photographs leads a discontented existence, in places and times which we cannot truly capture or grasp.<sup>13</sup> As the expressionist writer Kasimir Edschmid remarked, “The World exists. It would be meaningless to repeat it.”<sup>14</sup> Ickowicz invites us to the world and asks us to pause, to linger in it, before we decide – if we are at all inclined to do so – to repeat it.

<sup>13</sup> The paraphrase here is, of course, on Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

<sup>14</sup> Kasimir Edschmid, “Expressionism in Poetry” [1917]. Quoted in Günter Berghaus, (ed.), *International Futurism in Arts and Literature*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., 2000), p. 47.