

A.5

Sand and Forgetfulness

— Keren Yeala-Golan

Darkening skies descend upon a sleepy Israeli neighborhood as day turns to night. A girl stands on a street, both of its sides are identical like in a mirror image: asphalt pavements, low fences, gardens, and buildings set upon pilotis. Hanging balconies are stacked like boxes, one atop the other; the wide open blinds reveal the people inside the boxes, all of them watching Channel One news. Bluish light emanates from the televisions, crossing the balconies, reaching from one side of the street to the other. An arc of monotonous blue lights creates a haloe over the girl's head, before lifting into the dimming sky and up to the stars, interrupted by the blinding white light of the streetlamps crashing on the ground. Day in and day out the people in the boxes watch the news, and nothing is new.

I was six or seven at the time of my first architectural memory. I remember the exact place I was standing on the street, surrounded by identical buildings in a city of sand by the sea. The people were alike, the buildings alike, the day-to-day routines alike. At the moment the monotony sunk in I felt a sense of emptiness in face of this

mundane reality, like a doomed person getting a peak into her future and discovering it is identical to her present reality.

Every square building stands on pillars; under them, by the façade facing the street, there usually lies a neglected garden. Toward the back of the building lie garbage bins, a shelter, alley cats, fallen laundry, and pet graves. Decrepit fences separate these elements from their neighbors equivalents on the other side. The plants are losing ground to the sand, an island of sand isolated from the rest of the world. A sphere of infantile domesticity ruled by kids and their "territorial" games.

"Countries" – a game for two children played with sand and a knife: a circle is drawn in the sand and divided in half; a child stands on either side and throws the knife as far as possible into the opposite side; from the point where the knife pierces the earth a new line is inscribed. Borders are drawn and erased, changing with each throw of the knife. The winner conquers enough territory until the loser is left with no place to stand.

A first architectural memory is the moment a child understands something about the form of

life surrounding her, about her "home," an early mnemonic inscription, like a pattern inscribed in the sand.

Man is nothing but the soil of a small country
nothing but the shape of his native landscape
- Saul Tchernichovsky

How does a country structured on patterns engraved in the sand appear? Every two years a new national planning scheme is drawn in the sand and washed away with each wave of selective forgetting. How does the desire to settle in a diffused pattern, face up to the strongly rooted notion of wandering? We want to be entrenched in the land while at the same time we strive to destabilize and undercut that which has already been set. Memory and forgetfulness create a unique alchemy that is both solid and fluid.

Sand has no concept of limitation, it moves with no memory. For thousands of years we have been remembering the ancient story of the first

migration, which began with the expulsion of Adam from the Garden of Eden and ended with the fatal punishment: "...until you return to the ground; since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis, 3:19). The dead return to the sand and are covered with forgetfulness, and we sing of it in commemoration.

The sand will remember the waves
But the foam will not be remembered,
Besides by those who passed
With the late night wind.
From their memory it will never be erased.
- Natan Yonatan, "The Sand Will Remember"

In the 16th century the Maharal from Prague created a "Golem" from soil, a mighty soulless savage. The Maharal gave the golem life by inscribing three Hebrew letters on its forehead, "emet" (אמת, meaning "truth"). Through the written language and the conventional sign, a cultural order was created and cast, setting boundaries to the earthly savage. But even myths do not go according to design. According to the myth, the golem of Prague broke through his master's confinement, developed his own desires, and turned wild and destructive. The Maharal had to destroy him. He erased the first letters from his forehead. The two remaining spell "met," meaning "dead," and the golem turned back into a mound of earth. Life and death by the tongue and on the forehead.

The myth is attributed to the Maharal of Prague most likely because in his work he combined Aristotle's duality of matter and form with the Jewish doctrine that differentiates

Ana Mendieta, from the series *Siluetas*, 1976-78
אנה מנדייטה, סדרת הדימויים, 1976-78
Photo © the Estate of Ana Mendieta LLC, courtesy of
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between matter and the spiritual essence – the shape, the truth or the soul of the thing. The matter is the foundation for the form, and the form is its inherent life principle. Like an architect, the Maharal created a form by inscribing letters and signs on matter, by way of which the life and the soul enter. If form is the body's life-giving principle, then in the Israeli built body one sees a lot of matter without much of a form. The obsession with building imprints entire neighborhoods onto the land, mostly similar variations of closed-circuit layouts placed one by the other; devoid of public spaces, where human life is barely seen and is usually withdrawn into private areas.

The fantasy of Urburb living is promoted via images of idealized children dressed in white, running through endless fields. In these fields grow golem-like buildings, that might have already stood up against their creators, ascending from

the sand, spreading rapidly and cheaply. These breeding grounds are created by a young country motivated by a hysterical history, to create a womb for her wandering children.

Today the womb has become a real-estate bubble, where issues concerning the soul are subordinated to market forces, bureaucracy and politics. These same market forces have made city centers expensive, crowded, pressured and increasingly homogenous. While on the other hand, the Urburbs have continued to offer a safe and comfortable haven in a turbulent country.

Here we can turn our glance toward matter and form, toward the concrete place and the human essence, toward the life fabricated by a new generation, born to the eighty percent of the population that live in the Urburbs. In these real places we must learn to notice the marks left from that first architectural memory, and open our eyes to the truth that we want to inscribe.

Keren Yeala-Golan – a video, photography and performance artist, who received her MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York – lectures on the history of design, art and architecture at the Holon Institute of Technology. She has had solo exhibitions at Hacheder Gallery and the Artists House, Tel Aviv, and at Janco-Dada Museum, Ein-Hod, and has also participated in group exhibitions in Israel and abroad. Her work deals with rituals in relation to place and in mythological figures and rites of deconstruction and reconstruction.