

June, 2015

This Is Not a Painting

Reflections on Liat Elbling's exhibition, *Things as They Are*
by Yair Barak

"The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through' it for realistic perspectival space."
Clement Greenberg, *Towards a Newer Laocoon* (1940)

What you see is not a space. It is not a painting. No, this is not a sculpture, nor is it a photograph.

Liat Elbling's new works, largely as an extension of her earlier actions, albeit in a different manner - are a deceptive act of witchcraft. As a magician without a cape and a wand, she collects materials and objects into the studio and organizes them carefully, adds a paint potion, sprinkles lighting dust. The image that emerges is charged with magic, imbued with mystery, and incredibly beautiful. Ostensibly, these works strive to enchant and seduce. Another, more discerning examination offers an orchestrated reflection on the field in which Elbling operates.

Modernism demanded an extreme distillation of the medium from poetry, painting, and sculpting. Each of these media underwent a process of radicalization. Thus, for instance, in the framework of Modernism, painting ceased to be a description. This is how the flat abstract of the early and mid-20th century came to be. Is Elbling's photography a manifestly Modernist play of refining the photograph as a photograph? as a mechanical replication of structurality? or perhaps a photograph that endeavors not to be a photograph? to be a space, to be sculpting, to be architecture. Is Elbling's image a memory of a space that had disappeared from the face of the earth, or a proposal for an ethereal utopia that has yet to materialize? In his essay, Greenberg touches on poetry, painting, and sculpting, completely ignoring photography as a modern artistic medium, even though during those years it established its status as a legitimate (or at least adopted) member of the artistic discourse. However a Greenbergian thought can identify contradictions produced by Elbling's photography: it strives to be a Modernist painting, yet rejects flatness, employs sculptural practices, yet insists on maintaining a two-dimensional appearance. We may think that Liat Elbling's works refuse to be a medium. They do not succumb with immediate ease to the classification into artistic genres. And with that they refuse to be Modernist. In recent years, Elbling has been walking around a multifaceted polygon whose basis is photography and whose sides are tangent on painting and sculpture. She creates formal entities, spaces that take shape out of nothingness, simulations and simulacra of the domestic and the foreign.

In this exhibition, Elbling takes another step towards what is shaping to be a profound and thorough examination of architectural poetics, which draws its contents from the very heart of rationalist Modernism, at times almost Renaissance

in nature, assumes the guise of Brunelleschi's analytical action, and cunningly inserts itself into an imaginary, illusory world. In a complex process, Elbling transforms simple available materials into settings. She builds a model of the world. No, it is not the outside world, it is a pure structural entity. Elbling photographs fragments of geometric tangible expanses, drawing on color theory and canonic compositional elements, and subjects them to a precise perspective until they become images. The object becomes a photograph, rendering redundant (allegedly, only allegedly) the time it used to be a tangible object.

All along the way, it seems that Elbling's works also hold a house, or what used to be a house. Or what will once be a house. In previous works, she cloned photographs of houses, until they became abstract machines. Here, in her new works, she offers model spaces - non-functional, nondescript, evading architectural definitions. These are meta-spaces, like fundamental elements of domesticity. Similarly, the colors in these works, the monochrome models that adhere to the color directive, all the way to their final framing, are themselves - Pantone color elements. In the past, photography served Elbling as a raw material collected into the toolbox. She then unpacked it content and used it as her own. Now, when the latter is increasingly losing its footing in the concrete, she goes back to photographing that which exists. The ontology of Elbling's new photographs is not based on what exists in the world, it is created in the confines of her studio. She photographs what resides on the table in her studio, like it was a still life devoid of life. Only for several moments within this new world, can we assign this image with meaning, think of it as a signifier, see it as an allegory.

And finally, the photograph. The object, the meaningful surface (according to Flusser), a remarkably beautiful, meticulous artifact, holds the memory of formalist Modernism, of Mondrian, of Malevich, of Josef Albers, and Sol Lewitt. And the intense, too intense color. Intensity bordering on audacity. If art has Yves Klein Blue, it seems that now there are also Yves Klein gray and yellow and red, which Liat Elbling had painted on the table.