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Baboon or Macaque

Realistic education has accustomed the contemporary viewer to identify a figure with the psyche or soul in the psychological sense — the set of motivations, complexes, passions, and anxieties, stemming from its biographical story. The viewer is trained to explore the face and body of the photographed subject, seeking features and scars imprinted in it by the past, secrets and hints that have emerged from the depths of the figure's inner world onto the outer layer of skin.

This is not the case in Shai Ignatz's work. The people he photographs, mostly men, have neither an inner life nor a biography. They came into the world from the womb of fantasy, not from flesh and blood parents; they were not produced by birth, growth, and development, but are rather the reflection of a fixed dream image; a dream about the life of Adam in the Garden of Eden or a smutty, unbridled sexual fantasy, bubbling spontaneously from the delirious mind of the masturbator.

Ignatz's photographic subjects could have been strippers or dancers or porn stars — people whose entire being is extroverted and visible. Every feature in their bodies and attire (suit, tattoo, beard, piercing ring) explodes with meaning, usually borrowed from the language of pornographic literature and cinema. The photographed subjects, complete with the accessories adorning

them, take part in a dance of seduction; a frozen dance, fossilized in the blink of an eye by the camera's shutter movement. The seven veils have been removed, and the figure faces the photographer naked, exposed.

But who are they seducing? In fact, no one. They always stand alone. They stand alone in the cruising garden. They spend a life of solitude in their apartment, which fits the dimensions of one person and him alone, rejecting the presence of any invading stranger. Each of them radiates the dizzying power — refined or coarse, wild or kempt — of solitary human life.

The Garden

Following Ignatz, I enter Tel Aviv's Independence Park. The year is 1999, when he spent days and hours, weeks and months documenting the place; back then, the park — which I shall call "Atlantis," a lost continent, torn away from the city heaping with concrete and galvanized steel. One could also call it Sodom or Paradise Lost, and perhaps Innocence (but what is so innocent about a place in which countless fantasies and perversions, lies and even murderous lusts have congealed). It is a place where people gather who share a common secret, like members of a secret society or pirates, who readily identify each other on a busy street or in a bar of a port city. But their secrets will not be kept for long; in fact, they are eager to reveal it to the photographer, thus possibly exposing an inkling of the deep essence of the Sodomites.

"Every person who comes to Tel Aviv's Independence Park risks his life," wrote a District Court Judge in a ruling regarding a robbery that took place on site. She, too, knows something about Independence Park.

Almost every major city in the world has a place like Independence Park: the Roman Theater in Amman, Hampstead Heath in London, Prospect Park in New York, Fatih Park in Istanbul, Camino Verde (the Green Way; remarkably similar to Tel Aviv's Independence Park) in Mexico City, etc. A few years after Ignatz photographed in the park, it gradually emptied. The Sodomites left Atlantis and found their place as (ostensibly) equals among equals on every street corner, square, and promenade in the big city.

Ignatz documented the park at the end of its peak, just before Atlantis began to sink. Then it was the sandstone lot above the Tel Aviv beach, a bustling park — a place for sexual and social encounters, as well as an enclave, which attracted, by the force of inertia, people who had nowhere else to go. I, too, had a chance to see Atlantis at that moment, shortly before its submergence.

So I embark on a visit to Independence Park in the footsteps of Ignatz's photographs. I cross the main path, the one running from Hayarkon Street to the thicket that covers the sandstone ground. I pause for a moment, struck by that wild-looking lot, desert vegetation in the heart of a bustling city.

I enter the park.

In front of me is a bench. Two men sit on it and talk: "All the mysteries, all the pains of love, mine included, especially mine, can be solved with a monkey," one preaches to the other.

"But what kind of a monkey?"

"A tiny monkey, a shiny monkey, a slimy monkey, a baboon or a macaque. In fact, you'd better buy two monkeys, so that the monkey will not be alone."

"So I will buy a monkey, and another monkey for the monkey."

A rustle rises from the hide-out bushes. A third man, invisible to the others (a pervert? a cutthroat?) lurks in the shadows.

The people who visit the park can be sorted according to typological science, which I have developed over the years to classify the Sodomites. It is an incredibly simple science, free of sentimentalism. It is indifferent to the idiosyncratic manifestations of the figure and the whims of time and fashion. One versed in the typological science turns his gaze to a different, timeless, ageless essence, remarkably simple and yet mysterious.

I return to the park.

A man stands on the concrete square in its center, under the spotlights. He stands and screams at the top of his voice to a deaf, indifferent crowd: "The salvation of the world through the sobbing of worms, the salvation of the world through the sobbing of worms." He must be quoting a line he read in some book, but no one answers; people are busy with their own affairs. The preacher's

mouth is frothing, he is indifferent to the public's indifference.

I listen to the hide-out bushes. Silence. The third man (a pervert? a cutthroat?) lies in wait patiently, mute and alert.

Let me name some of the types that can be found at Independence Park (all appear in different variations in Ingatz's photographs). This is not, as aforesaid, a description of real people, and certainly not a psychological portrait, but rather types I have refined by virtue of the typological science I have developed.

The Official: He comes to the park directly from work, perhaps at an insurance company or an investment bank. He is still dressed in his work clothes: starched shirt, tie, and jacket. He holds a leather bag exploding with important documents (what are the chances that he will still hold onto his case when he leaves the park? This is a complex statistical question, dependent on countless variables: his experience and skill, the lighting, the degree of pity he will or will not be able to arouse in the hearts of the pickpockets swarming the park).

The official may be high-ranking, even famous; a person who in the world outside of Atlantis — in the office or bureau — enjoys an abundance of respect and flattery from his subordinates. Heads bend in his presence, ceremonial bows are offered him in the office corridors. In Atlantis, however, his status is worthless. He is like any other person. This may actually provide a fair share of relief for the official. After all, he too, no less than his subordinates, is a slave to trappings of power. He, too, dreams of being redeemed from his onerous position if only for a few hours.

The Jealous Lover: The most precious, perhaps the only, possession of the jealous lover is his sense of resentment. A fizz of disappointment is constantly bubbling in his body. It is the source of his power, which can also destroy him at any moment. The source of his disappointment is the world's refusal to live up to his romantic expectations (strange, unfounded expectations in a place like Atlantis). The jealous lover may come to Atlantis accompanied by a partner, usually a fickle and treacherous type who will offer himself to anyone and everyone, even to the most wretched inhabitants of Atlantis, just not to the jealous lover.

But the jealous lover will not leave the park unsatisfied. Within a few hours he will indulge himself in the full dose of heartache, bitterness and grievance he has asked for.

The jealous lover may also come to the park alone. Then he will pick a momentary partner, and will forthwith pin expectations on him, heaping fantasies and demands, only to be disappointed. The momentary partner is also a fickle and treacherous type, and he too will provide the jealous lover with a fair amount of disappointments and resentments.

It is interesting to note that all the aforesaid melodrama may last a few minutes or hours. The time in Atlantis is incredibly compressed. Stories, that may last many years on the mother continent, are condensed in Atlantis into a bitter time capsule.

The Moralist: He bears resemblance to the jealous lover, but his zealotry takes on a more universal nature. While the jealous lover bears resentment toward one person only (the treacherous beloved), the moralist bears resentment toward the entire human race. He will never stop complaining: "Look what he's doing to him, it's so wrong," he will sigh while looking at two strangers; "These homosexuals, they only want one thing," he will lament. The lover and moralist are twin souls. Therefore, they will naturally be bitter enemies. Each one is fanatical about his own resentment, demands that it be his and his alone, refusing to share it with another.

The Conman: He is a skilled spider, who spins a thick, sticky web around his helpless victim. The conman is, usually, an offspring of a long line of conmen, well-versed in every human weakness — loneliness, disappointment, confusion, boredom, metaphysical doubt; all of these make up the sticky web by which he captures his victim. The most skilled conmen are completely passive; they do not turn to anyone, neither do they try to seduce anyone. All they have to do is wait patiently. The victim will chance into their web. Human suffering, which is immeasurable, draws the victim to the web. He will demand consolation from the conman. And the price of that consolation is a sting.

The conman is an amazingly inefficient creature. It often takes him incredibly intricate maneuvers, a precise blend of seduction,



deception and violence, to obtain a rather lousy loot: a wallet with a few worn coins; a pocket book, perhaps a selection of translations from Verlaine's poetry, which appear, in the bulging pocket, like a thick pile of bills; an expired bottle of poppers; an empty tube of lubricant. Often the conman does his victim a good turn. For a paltry price he helps him forget great distress.

The Model: He does not come to the park for sex. As a rule, he is not interested in a relationship with anyone else. The model is busy only with himself, and comes to the park to be watched. Every night he is nourished by the lusting gazes of others. The model stands distant from the crowd, often shirtless, showcasing abs and chest muscles, placing his hand, casually as it were, behind his head, revealing his soft armpit hairs.

From time to time, the model changes position to allow others to review each and every bit of his body. All the Atlantis residents think of the model: who is this man, where did he come from, where will he go at the end of the night? (To a tiny room where he lives alone, or to the stately mansion of a sugar daddy?)

And the model, what does he think about standing alone all night. No one knows.

The model is a great danger to the photographer. He will ostensibly offer the photographer everything he requires to produce a perfect work of art: natural beauty, acrobatic flexibility, unconditional devotion to the photographer's demands. But if the photographer surrenders to the model, as the latter would have liked him to do, he will lose his independence and become the model's servant.

The Masturbator: The masturbator's visit to the park is intended to serve one purpose only — self-gratification. Like the model, he stands distant from the others, but in any other sense these are two antithetical types. While the model chooses a spot from which he will be seen from every angle, the masturbator will find a place where he will see and not be seen. He stands there bashful, and at the same time defiant (I have in mind Diogenes masturbating at the city gates, mocking the hypocrisy and pompousness of its inhabitants). The masturbator is alert to every movement. He will

weave all his impressions into a tangled fantasy plot, which he will reenact for many days and nights.

The masturbator holds the key to the gates of Atlantis. All the types exist in the folds of his thoughts, all their bodies, all their consciousnesses. It is the masturbator's lascivious looks that transform the inhabitants of Atlantis from ordinary people — weary officials, frustrated lovers, passers-by without personalities — into haloed theatrical figures.

The photographer is, obviously, the greatest masturbator.

And there are other types: the naïve, the one seeking group sex, the trader (trading his body or some other commodity), the park's intellectual, and so on.

I listen to the preacher again. "The greatest problem of mankind is the psycho-physical problem. Man has reached the moon, invented thinking machines, and yet, despite everything, has not unraveled the cement binding body and mind. Whoever solves the psychophysical problem, here and now, let him come to me and he will win a free blowjob." The preacher preaches, and no one answers. The crowd is busy with its own affairs.

A rustle is heard again, this time louder, from amid the hide-out bushes. The lurker (a pervert? a cutthroat?) prepares the stage for a grand drama.

The idea of Atlantis as a sunken continent, a trace from an earlier time — when the people of Sodom huddled in the shade of palm trees — carries great danger with it. A foul smell of nostalgia, a lament for lost years, arises from the thought of other days. The nostalgic person's infatuation with the past blinds him. On the other hand, many are happy about the changing spirit of the time, about the sinking of Atlantis, celebrating these bright days, when the Sodomites (seemingly) find their place as equals among equals on every street corner in the big city.

The truth is that both — the nostalgic man and the present-day man — are lying. The remedy for nostalgia fever is the typological worldview, a method I learned from Proust, and from Emerson before him. Anyone who trains himself in the observation of the

archetypes will find that nothing was lost, nothing has sunk. Everything that was in Atlantis, everyone who was in Atlantis, continues to exist in the modern city. All it takes is to look around, to adopt a clear and unsentimental outlook.

The typological approach may, indeed, carry a melancholic weight, the weariness of eternal repetition — the thing that hath been, it is that which shall be, and there is no new thing under the sun. But the more natural approach to my mind is the joy at the persistence of the ideal types, at the immense power of rebirth. The body does not die, the soul is not vanquished, the flesh sheds old skin, and time grows new skin in its stead.

Thus far I have focused on the people who inhabit Atlantis. But they are not there alone; they have never transpired there alone. The park teems with trees and shrubs and flowers and ferns; inhuman creatures, small and large, constantly roam Atlantis. They preceded the first humans who settled the continent, and will likely continue to exist there after they leave. Some of my favorite photographs in Ignatz's oeuvre are those documenting the plants of Independence Park: the cheesewood and saltbushes, the palm, olive, and acacia trees, the evening primrose flowers and the prickly cacti.

The plants are not just a backdrop to the human theater of Atlantis; they are an integral part of the drama taking place on the continental stage. The photographed subjects fuse with the plants — hands stretch into tendrils, head and pubic hairs grow soft leaves, the flower's reproductive organs reflect their human counterparts. Often it seems as though the plants consume those wandering amid them; the landscape eats children.

What is behind this fusion between man and plant? Perhaps the aspiration to transcend human boundaries, to cross the line separating fauna from flora, to become — by the power of will, by the power of desire — something which is neither man nor plant, but a hybrid, a man-plant.

An even wilder thought: perhaps behind this fusion is another aspiration — to transcend the boundaries of this planet. Plants are primary producers. They are the only organisms capable of extracting energy from outer space, from the light of the sun and

moon, and convert it into matter that feeds animals and plants (the photosynthesis process: during the day they feed on the masculine energy of the sun, and at night — on the feminine energy of the moon). The feet of the inhabitants of Atlantis thus stand on the coarse sandstone in a remote corner of the earth, but their heads aspire upwards, to the great lights of the cosmos.

A self-confident, perhaps too confident, youth walks into the depths of the hide-out bushes. Everyone looks at him and realizes his mistake, realizes all too well, but no one warns him. The youth is swallowed up by the hide-out bushes, confident of his resourcefulness, of his agility.

A knife is pulled, a scream is emitted; blood drips on the hide-out bushes, glistening in the starlight.

The Crime Scene

In the following years, Ignatz turned to photographing men in their homes — Israelis, French, Germans, Poles. All the men he photographed look to me like criminals and swindlers. There are serial killers and pickpockets among them, or so I imagine, drug dealers and extortionists, money launderers and impersonators.

Why do they seem like criminals to me? Facial expression betrays malicious intent. More importantly, they live alone in an apartment, in a castle, designed to guard their secret. They cannot tolerate the presence of another person (even the photo session is transient and brief). The photographer's role in relation to those criminals is thus twofold: on the one hand, a father-confessor, listening to the criminal's confession, cleansing his sins; on the other hand, a victim; the criminal will not hesitate to take advantage of the photographer's weakness and trap him in his web; the photographer flees the crime scene at the last minute, shooting on the run.

The criminal is always hanging by a thread. He has set his home in the heart of a bustling metropolis, but in his own eyes he is standing on the precipice of a crumbling civilization. "I have overcome the world," the criminal says to himself, recalling a verse from the New Testament (John 16:33), which he learned in his youth. The criminal's laughter echoes his scorn for other human beings, those who are forced to tolerate the company of



others; at the same time it conveys self-pity, the loneliness of the one who has overcome the world. The photographer is the only, perhaps last, witness to the bitter victory.

In another case, in the series of photographs depicting Monsieur Léri, the subject is a kind of jackal, traversing the ruins of a crumbling civilization. Monsieur Léri, a life-loving, decadent man, is photographed in the empty halls of Musée Carnavalet, an exhibition space showcasing the best Parisian art of the 19th century. He is modeling, naked, behind the crumbling works of art, playing the harp, having fun. “I, too, have overcome the world,” Monsieur Léri says to himself as he moves from one hall to the next in the empty museum at night.

Ashdod Beach

The beating heart of Ignatz’s oeuvre is a short 90-seconds film, an exercise he produced as an art student. He photographed his mother on the beach of Ashdod, his hometown. Inebriated with ecstasy and seductive, with lips smeared in bright red lipstick, the mother chases the camera, the photographer, while he gradually draws away. She catches up with him with considerable effort; positions herself in front of the lens for a brief moment, when the photographer draws away from her again.

It is a heart-stirring and heartbreaking dance of temptation. The mother fights for her son’s closeness, begging him not to draw away from her, while he refuses, leaving her alone on the beach of Ashdod. The end is deciphered in Ignatz’s later work: the son will draw away from the mother, go astray in Atlantis’s tangles bush, and visit the homes of criminals and international conmen. The entire abandonment drama is scripted and enacted in this short video. Nevertheless, the abandonment is not total. The mother’s perspective — feminine, maternal, external to the world of Sodom and Atlantis — never leaves him, not even for a moment.

A decade later, Ignatz would take a photograph which is an epilogue. His mother, wearing a blue dress, her thighs exposed, is photographed leaning against a tree in Independence Park. A renewed, heart rending encounter between the son — now a seasoned, privileged artist — and the mother, who seems to have remained not far from the Ashdod beach. The mother now looks peaceful, serene. She no longer chases her son. Ironically, she finds refuge on one of the wild trees of Atlantis.