

Notes on Shai Ignatz's Work

Shai Ignatz's exhibition "Goldi" deconstructs and reassembles his oeuvre from the last two decades. It departs from the usual division into series, and weaves past and present works together into a new body of work, offering fresh insights and setting different interpretations in motion. The deconstruction process constitutes a world that is biographical and intimate, and not necessarily chronological, introducing inversions and producing new associations and links. Thus, for example, the public space becomes a private space (in *Monsieur Léri's* photographs), and organized groups disintegrate into differentiated individuals (in the *WIZO Women* photographs or in the video work *Jo*).

Although Ignatz's work abounds with portraits, he is not a portrait photographer who takes pictures in the studio on commission. His portraits are unique in the circumstances of their creation, in the reason for the encounter with the subjects, and in the nature that encounter assumes. Over the years he has expanded the practice of portrait photography. His portraits are not based on close acquaintance with the subject, as is often the case with other artists. On the contrary, his first encounter with the subject — an encounter which he initiates through a random contact, usually through gay dating websites — takes place in front of the camera. The sitters are not professional models or celebrities,

but rather anonymous people whom he asks to photograph in their immediate environment, usually at home, or in a place that serves them as a substitute home. Ignatz does not stage the situation in advance, and does not know what nature the photographic session will have. Each photograph explores the interpersonal tension or intimacy created in conditions of foreignness.

Through his subjects, Ignatz constructs a biography. As aforesaid, he prefers to photograph people he does not know, who are like a *tabula rasa*. He meets them through photography, taking special interest in the gap between the figure he meets and the photographic product. Thus, in the photographs of *Monsieur Léri*, 2012 (pp. 234–249) for example, he focuses on a single figure, depicted in a public space that turns into an intimate space. Monsieur Léri, a middle-aged man who was on the verge of finishing his long tenure as director of the Carnavalet History of Paris Museum, feels at home in the museum space and acts naturally amid the exhibits — the embroidered sofas, rich wallpapers, and colorful tapestries of yesteryear — dressed or naked. The spaces in which he chooses to be photographed are rich in detail, from which certain information about him may be drawn, and the items in the background of the photographed portrait hint at the figure's personal story, but that story remains lacking and fragmentary.

Ignatz's work challenges the concept of acquaintance. The photographer and photographed subject let us into the innermost rooms, into the most intimate spaces in the house, such as the kitchen and the bedroom, but we do not know and will not know who the person being photographed is, his full name, profession, and other such details about him. Ignatz operates on the thin line between total exposure and complete anonymity of his subjects. He allows the sitters to expose themselves, thereby indicating the image they would like to present to the world, and revealing hidden yearnings and deep desires of the photographer and of the subject alike, but the ostensibly specific and highly detailed portraits remain completely anonymous in the end.

The photographs shed light on hidden, intimate loci. Their passion and desire are visible, but the eroticism lies in the act of observation, in the model's as well as the viewer's gaze. In all the

photographs featuring men or women, individuals or couples, outdoors or indoors, they look directly at the camera, aware that they are being viewed, by the photographer as well as the spectator. This is true, for example, in the explicitly libidinous photograph, portraying a man lying on a brown velvet Victorian sofa as if he were Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, his genitals exposed (pp. 212–213). Directing his gaze at the photographer/viewer, he indicates his willingness to surrender to the photographic event and the gaze.

In Ignatz's photographs, photography stands out as an event of mutual acknowledgement, in which the medium and the photographic subjects affirm one another and join forces. Ignatz chooses to present us with a single image or a single moment from the session, which may last a few hours, thus emphasizing the one-time quality of the encounter. As noted by Walter Benjamin, "the viewer feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident [...] finding the indiscernible place in the condition of that long past minute where the future is nesting, even today, so eloquently that we looking back can discover it."¹

The photographic act becomes a mirror of its subject. The gaze in the mirror, as Lacan taught us, is addictive because it conceals and at the same time reveals. In Ignatz's photographs, the desire to reveal the truth and an identity encounters a difficulty in giving these concepts real form. The subject's awareness of the camera's presence evokes embarrassment and sometimes pleasure, as described by Roland Barthes: "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."²

Exceptional in its circumstances is the series *WIZO Women, Melbourne, Australia*, 2010 (pp. 104–115) Unlike other series, these are commissioned portraits. The sitters are all older, affluent Jewish-Zionist women, who agreed to give in to the camera inside their

- 1 Walter Benjamin, "Short History of Photography" [1931], trans. Phil Patton, *Artforum* 15:6 (Feb. 1977), p. 47.
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans: Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 10.

homes with a smile (a facial expression which is also unusual in Ignatz's oeuvre), showing complete trust. The warmth and closeness that developed between the photographer and the sitters come through in the series. The WIZO women are photographed from the shoulders up in a horizontal rectangular format usually reserved for landscape or panoramic photographs rather than portraiture.

The portrait runs like a thread throughout Ignatz's oeuvre, as object and as subject. Even when he photographs a still life or an interior, he is photographing a portrait, so to speak. In his "still life" photographs, desire shifts from the figure to its space of appearance: the vegetation attests to desire as an abstract, invisible force, which photography sets in motion and brings to the fore. This is especially apparent in the 2000 photographs of flora in Tel Aviv's *Independence Park* (pp. 158–183), a series which directly engaged with questions of identity and gender. The agave plant, photographed against an open sky, calls to mind an erection, and the trees resemble phalluses, like an Eros of nature. Ignatz projects the park's sexual image onto its extraordinary flora. It is vegetation on the verge of dryness, which becomes a tropical jungle of sorts, where predators lie in wait, as described by Ouzi Zur. Ignatz documents "vulnerable masculinity through rigid and caressing leaves, a body touched by toxic inflorescence."³

The homoeroticism evident in some of Ignatz's works calls for a comparison with Robert Mapplethorpe (1946–1989), who was known for his photographs of flowers, mostly lilies, in addition to his images of upright, muscular, ideal male nude in classical poses, and large-scale black-and-white portraits featuring primarily celebrities. In Ignatz's work, the figures are anonymous and photographed in color; the flowers are local (for example, the oleander), the vegetation is generally sparse, in the process of wilting or losing its leaves, and instead of the muscular body (of mostly exposed African-American men in Mapplethorpe's case), he focuses on ordinary people, including aging, hairy, and not necessarily fit men. While Mapplethorpe's photographs convey

- 3 Ouzi Zur, "One Eye Shut," *Haaretz*, 14 December 2001 [Hebrew].

power, strength, and physical perfection, Ignatz's photographs relay masculine softness and fragility, revealing the body's wear and tear. In both cases, the featured men are proud of their sexuality and look directly at the viewer. Both artists explore the elusive boundary between the erotic and the pornographic through the portrait. Their photographs center on gay masculinity as a stylized form and an aesthetic claim. At the same time, the generational distance between Mapplethorpe, who was active in the 1980s, and Ignatz, who is working in the 21st century, is clear. Mapplethorpe offers a prototype for portrait and flower photography, and the affinities between the two; he emphasizes the aestheticization of both subjects and introduces a general physical ideal. In Ignatz's work, on the other hand, the vegetation is presented in an idyllic light, but not so the portraits, and furthermore, he documents specific individuals. Mapplethorpe depicts domesticated still life in a vase, while Ignatz photographs flora which is nature, outdoor vegetation, albeit — a cultivated outdoors (a park or a garden).

Ignatz's work is a personal project, based on direct photography that is blatant, intrusive, and unembellished. In this context, one is reminded of the groundbreaking body of work by American photographer Nan Goldin, who focuses on figures from her immediate surroundings, including transsexuals, prostitutes, alcoholics, drug addicts, and other people living on the margins of society. Ignatz, in contrast, photographs people with a decent bourgeois appearance. Goldin captures reality from the position of an insider rather than as an onlooker, living with her subjects over time, whereas Ignatz arranges a one-time encounter. Both Ignatz and Goldin photograph their models standing, exposed, in the center of the frame, looking straight ahead. The models put their trust in the photographer, and the photographers portray them with clarity, showing their flaws as well as their beauty by capturing human moments. Both artists move on the axis between the intimate and the public in color-saturated, intense photographs free of preconceptions and prejudice regarding their respective subjects, but while Goldin engages in documentation, Ignatz's photography is not documentary. Both photograph their models in their natural environments in a manner that invades their intimate space, but this is a consensual invasion based

on mutual respect between photographer and sitter. According to Naomi Aviv, "Ignatz is a surprising artist because in such a utilitarian world he offers us a feature which is ever so rare but ever so necessary and desirable, also in art: generosity. Gestures of kindness. [...] Generosity is the avant-garde of today and of tomorrow. Every encounter with one of his photographs conjures up his generous, committed presence, which bestows warmth and acceptance, furnishing its subjects with the most necessary thing for every person: a place. Every person has a place in his work."⁴

"Naming is that by which nothing beyond it is communicated," wrote Walter Benjamin.⁵ Ignatz insists on refraining from naming his photographs and makes sure not to number them or accompany them with a literal description. In this he neutralizes the image of any association which the name may carry, such as age, ethnicity, gender, or geographical location. In so doing, he forces the viewer to describe the work to himself and others by observation only (e.g.: the guy with the earring and red pants), denying typological sorting. According to Leah Abir, the intimacy that characterizes his works "would not have been created without the encounter in its present form, without the freedom and the importance the artist confers on the unique performativeness of each one of the subjects. [...] they occur outside time, outside the stream of social life. [...] The only frame is that of the camera; no story or background that can place and normalize. [...] The meeting of the viewer with the work is a divergence of that first encounter whose materials are now set to meet another singular person. That person, too, is now released from context and explanation and is invited to give in to the singularity of the moment with all its particulars."⁶

One cannot discuss contemporary photographic portraiture without referring to the mid-1980s body of work by Thomas Ruff, one of the major photographers exploring social classification and

4 Naomi Aviv in a letter to the artist, 21 February 2011 [Hebrew].

5 Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on Human Language," in *Reflections*, trans. E. Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 318.

6 Leah Abir, excerpt from the curator's text for the exhibition "Jo," Artists Residence, Herzliya, Israel, 2021.

individuality. Unlike Ignatz, whose work highlights variance, Ruff's work turns to the typological pole. In his monumental portraits from the 1980s, which were given the generic title *Portrait*, Ruff relied on passport photographs and mugshots, routinely created for identification purposes. He chose to photograph "normative" people, thus creating an anonymous resemblance between the depicted figures, which is seemingly objective and effortless. At the same time, he utilized cutting edge technology to create sharp photographs printed on large surfaces. Ruff focuses on the models' faces, shooting frontally against a uniform, neutral, mostly white background, lacking shadows and color, thus eliminating the appearance of details and obscuring individual elements which may provide more information about the figure. He does not try to convey the subject's inner world, but is mainly interested in the surface. The photographs have an identical rectangular format, and the subjects all look alike. They look at the camera, but their gaze reveals nothing. Ruff focuses on subjects belonging to the same age group and socio-economic class — young people in their twenties, all fellow students. In contrast, Ignatz's subjects span a wide range of ages and origins. He reveals the ravages of time on their faces and bodies, exposing them in their physical and mental nakedness. Background and figure are given equal weight and status: the background is an essential part of the portrait; the exterior attests to the interior, as an extension of the personal and intimate space, testifying to the inner quality of the place and the figure's inner self.

In contrast to the still photographs, which have no titles, names or years, the video works, which Ignatz creates concurrent with the series of stills, are given titles, consisting of the protagonist's first name and the year. These are short films about relationships, created as part of a photo session. In the video work *Olivier*, 2007 (pp. 228-233) a red-headed man undresses for the photo shoot, while posing questions to the artist about how he chooses his sitters and how he feels about them. In *Aurélien*, 2015 (pp. 264-269) the subject admits that opening his home to the camera is more daring for him than exposing his skin. This difference between Ignatz's still and video works derives from the fact that the latter provide much more than a glimpse into what is happening

between artist and model, mainly because they propose looking at the model as an active partner, as a subject rather than an object.⁷ The video expands the peek into the creative process, showing us the dynamics between two people, one observing and one observed. The video frame is fixed and stationary. The photographer stands next to the camera or behind it, entering the frame from time to time.

The power dynamics between photographer and subject are always discernible in Ignatz's work, but they are flexible and variable, at times unexpected. In *Manfred*, 2016-20 (pp. 202-207) — Ignatz's longest video work to date — we see a tall, thin middle-aged man, directing himself in front of the camera, smiling, stroking his beard, arranging his mustache, changing costumes, and moving between the spaces of the house: once he is in the kitchen, once in the living room, in the bedroom, or on the balcony. He tries to start a dialogue with the photographer, a personal interview of sorts, but Ignatz does not respond, maintaining the position of the silent observer, as described by Dalia Manor: "At some point the model tries to reverse the situation and direct the photographer, striving to redefine the power relations: he asks the photographer to lie on the floor while he stands above him to obtain the desired shooting angle, from bottom up [...]. The visual result is lame: Manfred's upper body is outside the frame, and Ignatz's body, too, is barely visible. As long as the original frame through which we observe the scene remains unchanged, the role reversal and change of position are meaningless. It is a scene that in other circumstances would have been edited out, but here it accurately demonstrates the photographer's full control over what we see."⁸

Photography and videography in Ignatz's oeuvre may be regarded as keys to one another, or as map and territory. Both practices are flexible, and the movement back and forth between them projects from the private to the public, and vice versa. Over the years, the video works grow increasingly longer, and Ignatz's figure as an artist and a person is also increasingly exposed. In

⁷ For an elaboration, see: Dalia Manor, "One Observing, One Observed," *Erev Rav*, July 2021 [Hebrew].

⁸ Ibid.

the still photographs he completely eliminates his presence, disappearing behind the camera, and the viewer knows nothing of him. In the video works, a dynamic with the subject develops, and the photographer even emerges every now and then, as aforementioned.

The deconstruction process underpinning the current exhibition reveals a unique body of work. By focusing on Ignatz's approach to the genre of portraiture, with the insistence on preserving the sitter's individuality, and the special link between still and video photography as distinct, complementary practices, the exhibition sheds light on the unique facets of Ignatz's photographic work. It is a corpus in which the elderly WIZO women of Melbourne coexist with the Parisian Monsieur Léri and the apollonian young men from Tel Aviv's Independence Park in a harmony of diversity, oscillating between total exposure and complete anonymity.