

Art's Wilderness

By Mieke Bal

"WILD" and then, on a separate light box, "AND URGENT": the first image in this book says it all. Art is wild: irreverent of official representation; and urgent, because it says things, raises questions not otherwise accessible. Urgent ones. How can this desertscape, made of arid land, be simultaneously so eerily beautiful and politically loaded? The moment is chosen when the light and the temperature change, the sun about to blind whoever happens to be on this site. What we see here only lasts a moment.

Looking is also urgent. Of the site, we see only those tokens of occupation, barely deserving the name "homes" with their fragile position, empty windows, yet with power poles and cables on the first two structures demonstrating the technological self-sufficiency of their inhabitants; the waving Israeli flag on the third one, their triumph. In the far distance, something is growing. Why does this image emanate emptiness?

The photograph is not a simple record. In the foreground, the scale of the stones indicates the perspective, making the land look barren and thus the occupation futile. But the perspectival structure moves slightly to the left, to the space behind the houses that we cannot see. It also places the photographer, the subject of the artwork. He is there, where we as viewers would stand, too; a bit on the right of the middle before the lower edge of the picture. Thus the photo declares its critical perspective within and through its linear one. It is this subject, the place from where the view is shown and seen, who includes the wild stones and the cultivated land; the shabby houses and the flag; the power cables and the power displayed; the beauty of the sunrise and the mountain ridge at the far distance. It is also he who chooses this briefest of moments and does not include people.

In *Wild and Urgent ii*, at the end of the book, the same landscape begins the picture, indicating, again, where the artist is. The power cables are closer, the houses are no longer visible, but that distant landscape, brought nearer and now during the evening, turns out filled with houses, a true village where people live who belong there. Out of reach from the point of

photography; but crowded, perhaps expanding. Everything is brought to the fore, hence, visually more threatening. What is wild, now, is not the desertscape but the village, as if during this ordinary day it had grown against the three houses to be a full-fledged town, so that the houses we remember seem wildly constructed where they do not belong. And the text in their light boxes is wild and threatening, as if it wants to race towards and potentially "engulf" the neighboring Palestinian village in the distance.

The plantation is now a frontier, the village the next one, a mode of separating "us" from "them", thus creating a situation of urgency indeed. Between these first and last pictures, the wilderness of injustice, fear, and the traces of violence, in abandoned sites, is given by that always-invisible artist whose presence is in the picture; it is he who presents. He is the real wild one, who with his ambiguous texts turns the tables on that drive to invasion and occupation by showing the firmly established village as part of the earth. Art does not re-present what existed before and after, but presents, brings forward, into existence.

And his presence is in the poetic, always ambiguous words. Ambiguous, yet strong and clear. Critical in the literal sense of separating, too, expressed in the space between the words, and sometimes the elements in the landscape. "Hit parade", for a bombed-out village, with the space separating the words giving "hit" full striking force, and making "parade" literally "boasting". "Land Lord" with the view from the perspective of the dislodged Palestinians looking out on the settlement that took the ground from under their feet; the settlement a bit high, as if overseeing the lower, invisible view. "All of One's Fears" for the small space between a synagogue and the ruin of a mosque. Subtly, the presence of the Star of David in the windows of the former refers to other fears. History creeps in. It was always there, we now realize. Not as an excuse but as a dynamic element, another subject, that ruins the landscape - that makes a ruin of the landscape. So empty, all these sites; yet so full, so many subjective presences. Only an artist of Attie's caliber can make wildness look so urgent, thus persuading us that it is.