

"The inhabitants of Valderada know that all their movements are, simultaneously, both the same movement and its reflection in the mirror with all the majesty and splendor of figures in a reflection. This awareness prevents them from leaving things to chance and forgetfulness, even for a moment."

Italo Calvino, *The Hidden Cities*, 1972

A Dark Black Spot | Yair Barak

City and Eyes,¹ Mali De-Kalo's solo exhibition is a four-channel video installation based on the continuous nightly traffic along the streets of the *Kiryat HaMelacha* (a small-industry complex) neighborhood in Tel Aviv. As in her exhibitions in recent years, De-Kalo presents work created particularly for this exhibition space. In fact, this is a site-specific work on two levels: one based on the environment in which it was filmed (the gallery is located in the neighborhood) and the other is based on the physical space of the gallery and on the dimensions of the longer wall on which it is projected. Four projectors are precisely placed in close proximity, creating a broad panoramic image.

The camera movement (which is characteristic of many of De-Kalo's works) recalls the act of scanning or hovering that simulates a cinematic dolly movement, long and continuous. The production mechanism is simpler than it seems: a camera attached to the window of a slow-driving car records the nighttime happenings along the streets of the Kirya. The small-industry complex is De-Kalo's natural and daily environment. Her studio is located a short walk from the gallery, and she spends many hours in it. During the day, it is a familiar space for her, safe and enabling, while in the work her other gaze is also present, the one that is active during the night wanderings, when the familiar becomes strange, as if someone is watching what is happening now - from the outside. In the 1990s, American photographer Lee Friedlander created a body of work presented under the title **America By Car**. It is a record of wandering around the United States in the late 20th century. Friedlander, who grew up in New York City, uses the car's interior to frame the scenes.

The image captured by the camera and projected on the gallery's walls is multiplied on a vertical axis. Thus, a symmetrical image is obtained, completely disrupting the sense of space. In fact, a dual inversion is at work here: the first occurs in the face of the area's nocturnal reality, which is the opposite of the daytime activity of the complex in many ways. The second inversion addresses the gaze, given the inverted image of the street. The encounter between the conventional street image and the upside-down one creates a third, extraterritorial space. These two inversions produce a significant sense of defamiliarization. The resulting image becomes futuristic, fictional, and, at times, surreal.²

¹ The title of the exhibition is borrowed from Italo Calvino's *City and Eyes* in his book *The Hidden Cities*

² De-Kalo mentions the film *Blasé Runner* and its characteristic aesthetics in this context.

The small-industry complex in Tel Aviv is a layered and conflictual realm. Its history has been written several times: first as a small industrial and workshop area, later as a center of prostitution and drug trafficking, and in the last two decades (while the first or second history have not become extinct) – as the undisputed center of the local art field. In the 1990s, artists started to rent work spaces in the area. Later, in the 2000s, the first galleries opened. In recent years, many cultural and entertainment centers moved to the neighborhood. The gentrification process in the complex is evident, but, miraculously, all the previous sectors continue to exist today.

Over the past decade, De-Kalo's work has been characterized by extensive use of archival materials. Her ongoing preoccupation with testimony and storytelling (and modes of delivery) were the beating heart of her work. Over the past year, however, there has been a significant shift in her artistic language. In both her exhibition **Big Spender** (Ahad Ha'am 9 Gallery, curator: Drorit Gur-Arie) and in her current one, De-Kalo distances herself from the severe documentary language that has been typical of most of her works in recent years, allowing formal playfulness, montage-like aesthetics, and a distinct use of dominant, almost musical sound. This shift is also evident in the way text – which used to be at the center of her work – is given a secondary status and is replaced by a world of images and contemplative, lyrical aesthetic language.

While her works in recent years have been characterized by maximum control and a clear pattern, the new work is based on two accidental errors. After the process of photographing (the videos were taken over several working days), when the files were transferred to her computer, an inverted image unexpectedly appeared. The automatic reversal mechanism of the smartphone's camera caused this, and what for a moment seemed like a problem became an exciting opportunity.

The second time chance has created a fundamental change in the work was the unplanned entrance of De-Kalo's dog (adopted a few months ago in the shadow of the war) into the screening space while she was working in the studio. Its black, animal shadow introduced a dark and disturbing stain into the projection, penetrating the work as a real threat. Soon, this mistake too was incorporated into the work and the black, amorphous blotch appears intermittently and its presence in the work can be described as an intrusive intervention within the already shaky reality. Scientists and historians use the term "productive error" to describe a deviation from the path that turned out to be a novel, revolutionary discovery. These two accidental "mistakes" became a central image in the exhibition.

City and Eyes is an urban portrait. It is an ethnographic, sociological document, but also a poetic work that maintains a heterotopic and sometimes even dystopian space. In other words, it can be said that this work is a documentary work, reality-based and denotative, but also a vision that produces a fantastic, connotative image of a multidimensional and chaotic world.

A seemingly minor detail in the work process becomes essential in thinking about it. In order to prevent reflection in the car window, the window was covered with a black cloth on the inside. This action created a black mirror that looks outward but is blind inward. Most of the

time, De-Kalo doesn't see what the lens is capturing. This is very typical of photography with technical cameras, in which the moment of photography is one of darkness. In fact – this phenomenon also occurs in reflex cameras where the mirror hides the viewfinder the moment the shutter is opened. I see deep meaning in this logical reversal that creates blindness while looking. The idea that photography shows us the world often faces an internal contradiction.

At a time when heavy disasters occur daily on a regular and ongoing basis, and alongside them, as part of an inevitable mechanism of repression, a routine has developed that for many includes recreation, leisure culture, and the preservation of social frameworks, **City and Eyes** becomes a poignant social allegory for the existence of parallel worlds. To the simultaneous possibility of a contradictory reality, collective denial, and living in the shadow of a constant threat.