Hollow Land : an observation post

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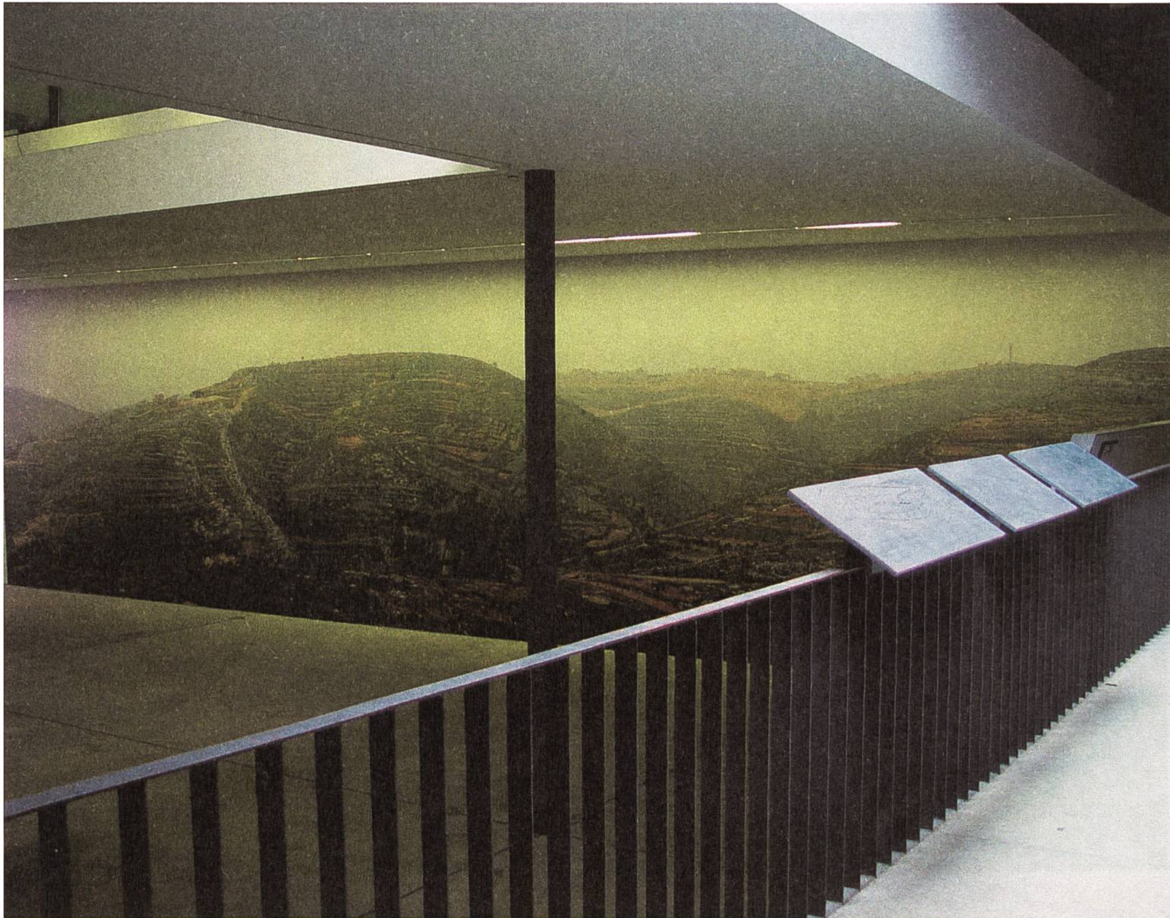

Installation detail, Territories Exhibition, KW Kunstwerke Berlin, 2003

HOLLOW LAND/AN OBSERVATION POST

by Eyal Weizman

The journey through the exhibition began with its conclusion: a panoramic image, 60 meters long, of the picturesque West Bank landscape. The photographs are taken from a location near the historical road leading southwards from Jerusalem. As one climbs a last low summit, the view of Bethlehem, its surrounding towns, villages and groves, opens to mid-day view.
It is the same view seen by Mark Twain when he was sent to report on a group of zealous American pilgrims engaged in what he describes as a "picnic on a gigantic scale."[1] Upon his arrival in Bethlehem, homesick, exhausted and discontent, he found himself standing a quarter of a mile away from the city, at almost precisely the same point we stood. Too tired to appreciate the surrounding landscape (where he wryly remarked that "the first 'Merry Christmas!' was uttered"), he offered nothing but the cynical consolation that only "... the music of the angels [this landscape] knew once could charm its shrubs and flowers to life again and restore its vanished beauty."[2]
Nonetheless, for his companions, as for other American travelers to the Holy Land, this landscape collapsed time and continents. It was seen as nothing less than a textual resource capable of providing the final, conclusive "proof" that the biblical narratives were historical reality, despite the contradictory historical facts that some modern scholars have purportedly discovered. The view allowed these pilgrims "to experience an exegetical landscape," as Hilton Obenzinger writes,[3] one whose topography, vegetation, architecture, and livestock were not just there without reason, but divinely placed as signs to be decoded and read. With this in mind, American pilgrims traveled to the orient in order to understand their own mission in the "West" – the very reason for traveling across frontiers and wilderness in search of a promised land, a New Jerusalem perhaps.
Looking at this modernized, updated landscape from the wind-swept slope beyond the bulletproof wall, which surrounds our vantage point and is, hence, by definition, the only thing absent from the panorama, we are at the edge of the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo, built on parts of the West Bank annexed to the city after the 1967 War. Marking the southern edge of the extended city, Giloh is, according to its planner and architect Avraham Yaski, "part of the wall enclosing Jerusalem." It is the southernmost edge of Jerusalem; the borderline beyond which Israeli law ceases and the martial law of the occupation begins.
Like an 18th century *Capriccio*, which shows all relevant landmarks and monuments regardless of their perspectival or locational relationship, the panorama contains within it a multiplicity of disparate elements, an almost complete collection of the conditions that exist throughout the occupied West Bank, with no need to edit the image. Physical and notional boundaries, military and cultural apparatuses of control, fences, observation posts, tank ramps, road blocks, settlements, olive groves, pine forests, and archaeological sites are camouflaged into a seemingly peaceful image.
A modern road spans the ancient valley as a giant bridge and cuts into the earth as a deep tunnel that circumvents the complexity of geography and history. It is a bulletproof, fast-lane Israeli

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1 Mark Twain, **The Innocents Abroad** (New York: Harper & Row, 1911), p. 1.
2 Ibid., p. 600.
3 Hilton Obenzinger, **American Palestine, Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Composed Views

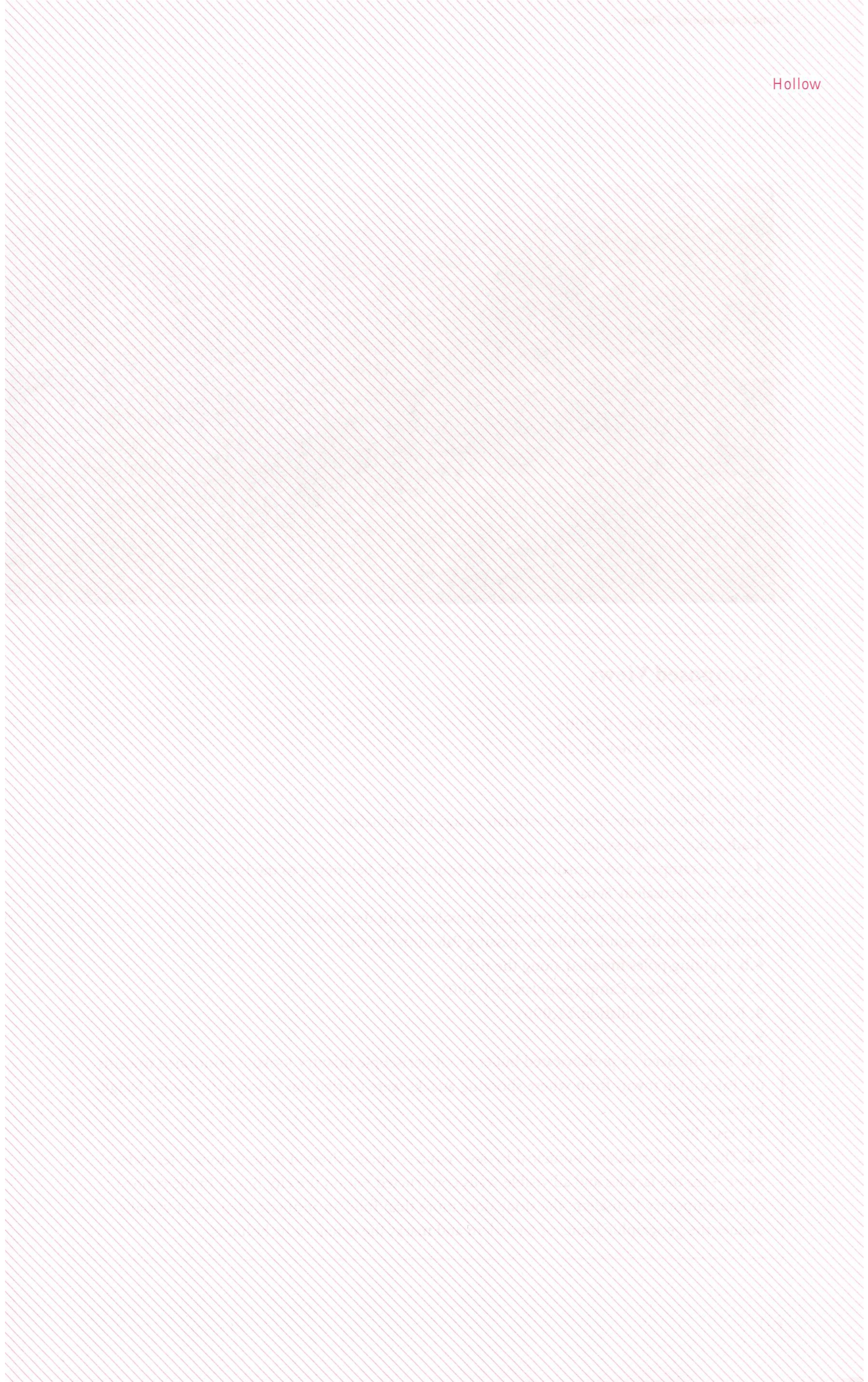
Daniel Bauer

left: Composed View II, 2003
right: Composed View III, 2003

1. Har-Homa
2. The olive orchards of the Palestinian village of Beit-Safafa
3.a,b,c,d,e. Sewage system
4. A tank rampant and a small infantry lookout bunker belonging to the Israeli Army
5.a,b. The Jerusalem 'Separation Fence'
6.a. An Israeli by-pass road connecting Jerusalem with the Jewish settlements to the south whilst by-passing Palestinian towns
6.b. Lighting poles installed along the road
7. Al-A'za Refugee Camp (population:1,300)
8. Bethlehem (population:22,000)
9. Herodion
10. 'See and Seen', a prefabricated bullet proof periscopic infantry lookout positioned towards the Palestinian towns from where shooting attacks were carried out towards the Jewish Neighborhood of Gilo
11. Eruv line
12. The oldest Jerusalem municipal by-law requires square, dressed natural stone – Jerusalem Stone – for the facades and all visible walls constructed within the city limits. In the context of contemporary Jerusalem, the stone does more than fulfil an aesthetic agenda – it visually defines the geographic limits of Jerusalem and marks the extent of its holiness.

13. The Jerusalem 'Separation Fence'
14. Hebron Mountains
15. Road block made of piled earth marks the closure of Bethlehem.
16. A Palestinian road under the Israeli bridge marks the physical separation of traffic arteries.
17. The Tunnel Road
18. Bullet protection wall
19. The Arches House
20. Beit Jala
21. Bethlehem
22. The Jewish settlement of Har-Gilo established: 1976, population: 350
23. Pine forest
24. The patrol road of the Jewish neighborhood of Gilo
25. An olive orchard

Those are two out of three panoramas shown at the group exhibition Territories, Kunstwerke Berlin, in 2003. Photographs by Daniel Bauer, captions and installation by Daniel Bauer, Eyal Weizman, Rafi Segal, and Anselm Franke.



Land

security bypass road that transports Israelis from Jerusalem to the south bypassing Bethlehem and its surroundings, not in two dimensions but in three. About this road the Israeli historian Meron Benvenisti wrote: "...the person traveling on the longest bridge in the country and penetrating the earth in the longest tunnel may ignore the fact that over his head there is a whole Palestinian town and that on his way ...he does not come across any Arab."[4]

Both the valley spanned by the road and the city under which the tunnel has been built are areas handed over to limited Palestinian sovereignty under the Oslo accord. The physical separation, the environmental aggression, and the historical short-circuit are all mirrored in a simple but bizarre political anomaly: the 'border' extends along a horizontal line. The city is under Palestinian limited sovereignty but the road below it is within Israeli jurisdiction, separating the two national groups across the vertical dimension. Benvenisti continues: "...The bridge and tunnels are not the real engineering wonder: the road managed to crash the three dimensional space into six dimensions – three Jewish and three Arab."[5]

These spatio-political manipulations have created an Escher-like space that seeks to multiply a single territorial reality into two separate but volumetrically overlapping national geographies.

Visitors to the exhibition enter the building one level above the gallery, enabling them to view the panorama from above. An engraved metal plaque, similar in type to those set up for tourists near panorama views or monuments of historic value, shows the landscape with captions identifying the locations, landmark by landmark. The image becomes the map of a battlefield.

Since the Renaissance, landscape representations doubled up as cartographic devices and were sometimes used to plan sieges or organize defense. In contrast, the 19th century, obsessed with its emergent nationalism, used landscapes as vehicles for the construction of the national citizen. Landscapes, acquired through occupation, unification, or acquisition, were domesticated and familiarized through the dissemination of a unified narrative. A specific way of seeing was thus imposed on the landscape and reinforced by structures, such as plaques, to identify hilltops, national monuments, battlefields or other sites to be mythologized. The placement of bronze plaques explaining the landscape point by point assisted in educating the new citizens, who were not always familiar with the outer extent of their state, that is, with anything beyond their immediate "natural" surroundings.

Zionism, a national movement whose origins lie in 19th century Europe, designated and identified such views – e.g. Jerusalem from Mount Scopus or Massada from the shores of the Dead Sea – which embodied or provided a commentary on its national ethos. In creating its ideological subjects, Zionism treated landscape as an allegory for political and ideological themes.

Identification with the landscape and its history was promoted in schools and youth movements. The entire expanse of the land of Israel, with all its contradictions, was seen as a single totality – an abstract, geographic, and cartographic creation so complete as to pose a sharp contrast with the organic and intimate relationship to the immediate, local environment, which Zionism assumed was "all the Arabs possess."

The picturesque view from the hilltop overlooking Bethlehem thus serves a political agenda: by feeding the mythic imagination, it gives settlers the sense of a foundational authority based on historical continuity. The landscape functions as a commodity advertised in countless sales

4 Meron Benvenisti, **An Engineering Wander,** in «Ha'aretz», 5 June 1996 [in Hebrew]. This editorial later appeared in French in **Pre/occupations d'espace/ Jerusalem au Pluriel** (Marseille: Image En Manoeuvres Editions, 2001), pp.171–173.

5 Ibid.

brochures designed to attract people with the promise of homes built in beautiful surroundings, as in the case of a brochure luring American settlers to Emanuel, a development with "...a magnificent view of the coastal plain and the Judean Mountains. The hilly landscape is dotted by green olive orchards and enjoys a pastoral calm."[6]
In the introduction to his book, *Landscape and Power*, W. J. T. Mitchell thinks of landscape "not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed."[7] He asks how landscape works as a cultural practice that doesn't "merely signify or symbolize power relations" but is in itself "an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power."
In this case, the "beauty" of the landscape contains a cruel paradox: the very thing that renders the landscape "pastoral" or "biblical," its traditional inhabitation, its cultivation in terraces, its olive orchards, stone buildings, and the presence of livestock – these all are produced by the Palestinians, whom the Jewish settlers came to replace. The pastoral landscape, being in effect the work and body of the local Palestinian, is precisely the tactical target and the strategic interest of the military establishment, whose aim is permanent surveillance.
The elevated areas, where the government and the army pursue the goal of establishing a presence, sometimes in the form of a civilian settlement, provide tactical vantage points for reconnaissance and deterrence. The pastoral landscape, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, started shooting back. The bullet-proof wall beyond which we stand is material proof of the danger lurking in the landscape.
The dimensions of the image in the gallery follow a specific logic. Details are "blown up" in the photograph in search of clues, thus reconstituting yet another gaze – that of the intelligence specialist, engaged in enlarging and cropping photographs in order to identify and delineate events and clues engraved in the landscape.
The three ways of looking at the landscape – through the eyes of the tourist, the nation, and the military – share the same basic motivation: they all seek to interpret the landscape in order to decipher the hidden agenda buried within the conglomeration of its details.
Conflict is being waged in order to gain possession of a landscape but that "landscape" is in effect an artificially arranged and totally synthetic environment, as designed as any built environment, within which all elements like mountains, forest, rocks, and ruins as well as paths, roadblocks, or the blackened windows of homes function, not as the things being fought for but as the very weapons of the conflict themselves.

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6 The brochure is titled **Emanuel, A Faithful City in Israel** (Brooklyn, New York: The Emanuel Office, 1988).
7 W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., **Landscape and Power** (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.1.